

Populism, Religion, and Social Media in Central America

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how presidential candidates Fabricio Alvarado and Nayib Bukele used Facebook during the elections in Costa Rica (2018) and El Salvador (2019) respectively to develop a particular style of communication that blended populist elements and religious discourse. This style of communication extended traditional modes of populism that have prevailed in Latin America since the turn of the century (emphasizing the notion of the hero who comes to rescue “the people”) but expressed them in an explicitly religious way (stressing the role of a “messiah” who comes to alter the established political order). We conducted both content and multimodal discourse analyses of 838 posts made by these candidates on Facebook

during their respective electoral campaign. We argue that the study of these campaigns would be incomplete without accounting for the relationship between populism, religion, and social media. While populism gave political validity to religious discourse, a religious imaginary provided populism with charismatic and messianic authority. This populist/religious reason found an ideal expression in Facebook and, simultaneously, was resignified by this platform's affordances. In this way, we assess how fundamentalist Christianity has become a legitimating force of knowledge and politics in the context of epistemic tensions that shape contemporary Latin American societies.

Keywords

Central America - Latin America - Populism - Religion - Social Media

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In February 2020, as the country's Ministers summoned an extraordinary council of the Legislative Assembly, El Salvador's President, Nayib Bukele, gave a speech in front of a crowd outside of the Assembly. After taking a selfie with protesters, he addressed the crowd: "I want to ask them [deputies] to let me in [the Assembly]. How many of you here are believers? [...] I want to ask you to allow me to enter the National Assembly to pray so that God will give us wisdom for the steps ahead. Will you authorize me? May God bless you, Salvadoran people." Bukele then entered the Assembly surrounded by the military and sat in the president of Congress's chair, where he proclaimed: "I think it is very clear who is in control of the situation and the decision that we are going to make now, we are going to put in God's hands. So let's pray." Bukele left the Assembly after claiming he had received instructions from God to be patient (Wolf 2021).

Two years before, in January 2018 in Costa Rica, Evangelical candidate Fabricio Alvarado's popularity (not to be confused with his then opposing candidate and then President, Carlos Alvarado) skyrocketed during the campaign, when he publicly rejected an advisory opinion issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on the rights of same sex couples. He adamantly indicated that, should he be elected, he would quit the Inter-American human rights system to avoid the imposition of the LGTBI agenda. Alvarado won the first round of the election. When he lost the second round, he knelt on stage in front of the television cameras, raised his hands to the sky, and prayed out loud: "I am not ashamed to believe in and love God. We will continue working to defend life, to defend the family, to defend ethics and transparency, to defend the great Costa Rica in which we all believe and which we all love."

These two examples share several common features: they were performed by political leaders who drew on religious references in their speech and non-verbal language; both politicians claimed to act as God's approved representatives of "the people"; both men presented themselves as "messiahs" who came to rescue "the people" from dangerous threats; and both politicians strategically used social media to promote their messages. Drawing on both content and multimodal discourse analyses, this paper analyzes how Alvarado and Bukele used Facebook during Costa Rica's and El Salvador's presidential elections respectively to blend populist elements and religious discourse. Their style of communication extended traditional modes of populism that have prevailed since the turn of the century in Latin America (emphasizing the notion of the hero who comes to rescue "the people") but enacted them in an explicitly religious way (stressing the role of a charismatic "messiah" who can alter the established political order).

By examining these cases, we provide a first empirical analysis of the links between populism, religion, and social media in Central America. We argue that the study of these campaigns would be incomplete without accounting for any one of these three issues and their relationships. While populism provided political validity to the religious beliefs advocated by these candidates, religious imaginaries endowed populist discourses with charismatic and messianic authority. Social media offered them a means to materialize this populist/religious reason but was also resignified by it. The focus on two Central American countries offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of populism around the world.

Populism, Religion, and Social Media

On Politics and Religion

Religion has different meanings in different cultures (Fitzgerald 1997). For Williams (1996: 374), religion is both culture (that is, practical understandings, conventions, and ways of life and experience) and ideology (that is, “an organizing principle for the reordering of society [...] clothed in the universalist language of God’s will and transcendent justice”).

We theorize the relationship between politics and religion as a continuum of positions between the politicization of religion and the sacralization of politics (Zúquete 2017). In Latin America, the politicization of religion has been tied to the formation of Evangelical parties and movements, which must be traced back at least to the Cold War. By the 1980s, Evangelical parties operated in 12 countries of Latin America. Candidates from such movements participated in presidential elections in seven of these countries between 1987-1998, obtaining legislative success in Brazil and Guatemala (Bastian 1999). This success partly resulted from the significant growth of Evangelical churches in the region (Pew Research Center 2014). More recently, debates about gender, abortion, sexual and reproductive education, contraception, and same-sex marriage have taken on great importance in elections in Latin America (Fuentes Belgrave 2019; Oualalou 2019; Pignataro and Treminio, 2019; Siles et al. 2020).

On the other end of the continuum, the sacralization of politics refers to the “calculated, deliberate, and partisan use of faith” by political leaders--the “God strategy,” as Domke and Coe (2008: 7) call it. Politicians have specifically used religion to set the agenda around certain values to bolster support of key constituencies, to sustain a sense of community in the electorate, and to appeal to voters’ emotions (Manjarrés Ramos 2020). In this sense, religion is a “political resource,” as Williams (1996) puts it, which offers “coherent and elaborated cognitive rationales that diagnose social problems, prescribe possible solutions, and justify [people’s] actions--often in the cause of universal verities” (p. 377). To implement the “God strategy,” politicians have

turned to two main factors: emotional rhetoric and religious identities (Chapp 2012).

Accordingly, some have performed the role of preachers to interpellate audiences and elicit an emotional response from them (Pihlaja 2020).

Enter Populism

Populism offers a useful analytical entry point to understand how positions in this continuum are performed. Researchers have operationalized the study of populism by focusing on two interrelated dimensions (which we use to structure our empirical analysis in the next sections). First, scholars have analyzed populism as a “thin-centered” ideology, that is, “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” (Mudde 2004: 543). Four elements have gathered the attention of scholars in this sense: the essentialist appeal to “the people”; the consistent attack on elites; the ostracization of dangerous “others”; and the idealization of a given community or heartland (Bracciale et al. 2021; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Engesser et al. 2017).

Second, researchers have envisioned populism as a style of communication. Scholars have operationalized this approach by examining various elements: the appeal to emotions; the emphasis on the figure of the leader; the sharing of private aspects of politicians’s lives; antagonistic discourses; the solution of political problems through popular wisdom; and the use of informal, vulgar, and simplistic language (Bracciale and Martella 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018; Engesser et al. 2017). Although we differentiate these two dimensions for analytical purposes, we consider them as mutually constitutive: “thin” ideologies come into being through the

articulation of certain discursive elements, while styles of communication only make sense when employed to define certain (ideological) issues.

The ties between populism and religion have received relatively little attention (Siles et al. 2021; Williams and Alexander 1994). Zúquete (2017) referred to blends of populism and religion as “missionary politics,” which he defined as political movements “characterized by a dynamic interaction between charismatic leadership, a narrative of salvation, ritual, and the creation of a moral community that sees itself with the collective mission of fighting conspiratorial enemies, redeeming the nation from its alleged crisis” (453).

We draw on the work of Max Weber to further theorize the links between populism and religion. Weber (2008: 157) defined charismatic domination as “the authority of the special personal *gift of grace* (charisma), absolutely personal devotion, and personal trust in revelation, in heroism or in other leadership qualities of an individual” (emphasis in original). Accordingly, for Weber, charismatic domination was expressed through the self-abandonment of those who obeyed the charisma of a leader. Weber (1968: 48) theorized charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, super-human, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” The charismatic person is thus perceived as a leader who has received a special “call” to fulfill a role. Individuals do not obey this leader because of any value or statutory regulation, but rather because they *believe* in this person.

Campaigning and Populism on Social Media

Finally, scholars have also considered the role of social media in the development of both populism and electoral campaigning (Aalberg et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2014; Waisbord and Amado

2017). Some authors have framed the link between social media and populism as an “elective affinity” shaped by factors such as social media’s identity as a megaphone for expressing unrepresented voices and the specific affordances of social media that help populists motivate people around certain symbols (Gerbaudo 2018; Hopster 2020).

More broadly, researchers have argued that social media’s affordances offer a fertile ground for populism and electoral campaigning because they allow personalizing political campaigns and frame them around the figure of the leader; exploiting populist styles of communication in contexts of polarization; circumventing editorial and journalistic filters; obtaining the attention of different social groups through viral content; creating feelings of community, identification, and belonging in the electorate; microtargeting certain publics and constituencies with specific messages; using multimodal discourses for various political ends; and measuring the “will” of “the people” (through participation metrics) (Bracciale et al. 2021; de Vreese et al. 2018; Gerbaudo 2014; Hopster 2020).

Research Design

This study drew on two methods: content analysis of posts in Fabricio Alvarado’s and Nayib Bukele’s Facebook profiles during their presidential campaigns, and multimodal discourse analysis of the posts that explicitly mentioned religious elements. To further contextualize our findings, we conducted interviews with Alvarado and his campaign director. We discussed the role of media technologies in the campaign, most notably social media platforms, WhatsApp, and citizen groups that promoted his candidacy on Facebook (Carazo et al. 2021). These conversations lasted for an average of 65 minutes. We sought explanations of similar issues given by Bukele and his communications team during the campaign. We found some material to

conduct this analysis in articles published by news outlets and in previous research on Bukele's campaign and communications strategies (Grassetti 2020; Ruiz-Alba 2020).

Several reasons justify our case selections. Most studies of populist communication have been conducted in single countries (Engesser et al. 2017). Yet, (religious) populism also has regional characteristics. All Central American countries are among Latin America's top eight with the largest Evangelical populations (Boas 2020; Pew Research Center 2014). Pérez (2019) even refers to a "Central American model" of Evangelical political power. Considering these cases thus helps capture patterns that cut across the region. Because of the differences in their political systems and the diverging results of their elections, this comparison also allows us to add nuances and symmetry to the analysis. Furthermore, both candidates have different political profiles: while Alvarado was first a religious figure who entered politics later on, Bukele first developed a political trajectory in which religious elements have become more important recently.

We focused on Facebook because it is the most used platform in both Costa Rica and El Salvador. According to Latinobarómetro (2018), 77% of the population in Costa Rica use Facebook (the highest percentage in Latin America) and 60% in El Salvador (the region's average). Facebook also occupied a central role in how both candidates built a public profile as politicians both before and during these campaigns (Carazo et al. 2021; Marroquín 2020).

For the content analysis, we used Facebook's CrowdTangle app to collect the posts in Alvarado's profile between October 2017 and March 2018 (N = 653), and Bukele's profile between October 2018 and February 2019 (N = 185). To analyze major themes in the posts, we built on previous studies to develop a codebook focused on both public affairs (campaign issues; government plans; political proposals and opinions about the government, economics, business,

or the state of the country) and non-public affairs (the private life of the candidate and opinions about sports, entertainment, culture, technology, and crime).

We also coded posts for presence of self-promotional messages, operationalized by Waisbord and Amado (2017: 1334) as “references to presidential activity inviting to access articles, transmissions, videos, advertising ([including] links or schedule), and/or to attend conferences and meetings (virtually or personally).” We coded posts as antagonistic discourse posts when they contained “messages that annoy, question, criticize, bully, denounce, threaten, or refute any person, media, and institution” (Waisbord and Amado, 2017:1334-5).

We considered religious discourse as language employed to refer to “thoughts, emotions, actions, institutions, objects [...] beliefs, experiences, rituals, [and] moral codes [...] that constitute religion” (Sztajer 2016: 115). We looked for both explicit and implicit references to these elements in every Facebook post. Finally, we coded for the tone employed in these publications (such as emotional, informational, belligerent, etc.) (Bracciale et al. 2021). Posts could be included in more than one category (for example, if they were characterized by both religious and antagonistic discourses).

We conducted discourse analysis of posts that contained indicators of religious discourse following the principle of theoretical sampling. In other words, once content analysis had provided us with a general understanding of thematic and stylistic preferences in posts, discourse analysis maximized opportunities to identify the properties, dimensions, variations, and relationships of religious elements. Our analysis of these posts focused on three issues: *formal* (the use of certain pronouns, adjectives, and syntaxis); *graphic-iconic* (the use of punctuation, images, and hashtags); and *semantic* (centered on the use of discursive strategies). By integrating these three dimensions, we identified how both candidates used multimodal resources to blend

populism and religion. The content analysis thus showed us *what* the candidates' discourse was about and the discourse analysis showed *how* this discourse was articulated.

According to van Dijk (2019: 9), a semantic macrostructure “accounts for the various notions of global meaning such as topic, theme or gist” that provide meaning and coherence to a certain discourse. Thus, macro semantic structures can be analyzed by applying certain rules derived from the principles of explicit semantics. In order to isolate the sequence of themes that articulate the semantic macrostructure of both candidates' populist and religious discourses, we applied van Dijk's (2019) four macro-rules: deletion (removing all the textual propositions that were irrelevant for the interpretation of a specific unit or post), selection (identifying the relevant textual propositions that function as interpretative conditions), generalization (constructing conceptual propositions based on the semantic details present in the posts analyzed, such as “patriotism,” “redemption,” sovereignty,” and “corruption,” among others) and construction (developing global facts that are not necessarily explicit in the text).

Fabricio Alvarado: The Mission to “Restore” Costa Rica

Costa Rica is often considered one of the most stable democracies in Latin America. According to IDESPO (2019), 52% of Costa Rica's population are Catholics and 27% are Evangelicals. Compared to the rest of Central America, the growth of Evangelical churches has been rather slow (Boas 2020). Yet, Evangelicals became a political force earlier than in other countries of the region. A coalition of Evangelical movements formed the first political party in the country in 1981 and another one in 1995 (Zúñiga 2018). These parties obtained their first deputy in Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly in the 1998 election and have had at least one

deputy in each election since. Despite constant internal disputes and organizational divisions, these parties have retained ideological consistency (Pineda 2019: 151).

Fabricio Alvarado's candidacy in 2018 must be situated within this larger historical project of the politicization of religion in the country. Alvarado, who was 44 years old when he ran for office, is a journalist who had a career as an Evangelical singer and preacher before becoming involved in politics. He was elected as deputy in the country's Legislative Assembly (2014-2018), representing an Evangelical party (*Restauración Nacional*) with a clearly religious and conservative political agenda.

Alvarado was seventh in the polls one month before the election. As noted above, this situation changed when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights answered a query from the Costa Rican government that favored the protection of same-sex couples' rights, among other issues. In large part because of his response to this event, Alvarado won the election's first round (25% of the votes) but lost to *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (PAC) (the incumbent party) in the second round.

Ideology Elements

Alvarado's campaign on Facebook was anchored in a populist separation between "us" ("the people," his political party, Christians) and "them" (the traditional political class and those who promoted progressive politics with regards to the rights of same-sex couples). He appealed to "the people" by using "*nosotros*" (we) in an inclusive way, that is, the pronoun was the subject of the verb rather than its object (as in "us"). This inclusive "we" was present in catchphrases that he often employed, such as "Time to come together" or "Let's do it together."

Alvarado argued he had the obligation to end the alleged corrupt practices of traditional politicians. He posted on Facebook: “Christians can participate in politics and not only can, but also must. Our countries demand politicians to close the door to corruption and act with transparency. We can and must do it.” He thus defined himself as a Christian turned into a politician because of a moral obligation. He suggested that, should the official party (PAC) win again, religious freedom would be in jeopardy. The day after a debate, he wrote about PAC: “In yesterday’s debate we made it clear that there is evidence to show which party has attacked the Catholic Church and which party has attacked religious freedom in this country.” This post shows Alvarado’s use of the religious freedom banner to include both Catholics and Evangelicals into the “us” that was threatened by the incumbent party (“them”). By implication, he suggested that, even as an Evangelical, he could protect Catholic values. He consistently sought to interpellate Christians in general (rather than emphasizing differences in denominations).

This blend of populist and religious discourses had one goal: to give the Costa Rican electorate a reason to vote for him on election day. Three years before the election, survey data showed that Costa Ricans generally say they don’t approve of the mix between politics and religion. However, when politics “are linked to a specific agenda, such as abortion and same-sex unions, the moral principles proclaimed by religious leaders are activated among believers” (Fuentes Belgrave 2015: 73). To further activate the political force of religious belief in the electorate, Alvarado combined “classic” elements of the populist ideological toolkit: attacks on elites, the notion of dangerous others, and invocations of the motherland.

For example, in the video post with which he responded to the Inter-American Court’s opinion, Alvarado made a political/religious call to war, a somewhat rare act in a country that prides itself on the myth of being peaceful. In both the text of the post and the content of the

video, he incorporated an extract of a Costa Rican patriotic anthem with a high symbolic load: “Let us know how to be free, not diminished servants.” He then asked his “followers” to mobilize by asking them: “Are we going to keep quiet?” The most obvious response to this threat to the motherland would be to vote for him. Alvarado performed the role of a preacher to interpellate a congregational political community by conflating Costa Rican citizenship and Christian beliefs. He also suggested that the approval of marriage equality would be just the beginning of a long chain of events against traditional Costa Rican values, particularly the imposition of abortion.

A key strategy in the populist appeal to “the people” is the use of shared traditional norms and values (Aalberg et al. 2017). This was the most distinctive ideological element of Alvarado’s campaign on Facebook. Alvarado positioned himself as the true representative of traditional family values, in contrast with PAC’s “moral decadence” (Pineda 2019: 157). He also used his party’s name (National Restoration) to suggest he was God’s chosen one to “restore” Costa Rica through Christian values. This slogan invoked a term with strong biblical undertones to send a clear message: with God’s guidance, he could provide much-needed repair or renovation to a country destroyed by his “enemies.” He used the hashtag #RestauremosCostaRica (#LetsRestoreCostaRica) to tie the idea of restoration to multiple issues (such as the economy or the justice system.) These messages implied that he had received from God the charisma to transform Costa Rica into a Christian nation. Alvarado’s charisma came explicitly from religious practice; it was, as Weber (1968) defined it, a product of specific spiritual exercises and behavior. Alvarado was charismatic in the sense that, as God’s chosen one, he received the special *gifts of grace* (from glossolalia to divine wisdom).

Alvarado pointed to the Bible as the source to determine those norms and values he would promote as president. To prove this, he emphasized the centrality of prayer and religious mentorship throughout his political career. He posted:

[Today] I spent some time going to my office and to the plenary to pray and ask God for understanding and wisdom, not only for me, but also for my 56 fellow deputies. I was joined by my pastor[s]. Those of us who believe in God know that prayer is important. Let us pray that 2018 will be wonderful for our beloved Costa Rica. “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel ...” Romans 1:16.

Alvarado suggested that all his decisions as a deputy had God’s approval and presented himself as a political intermediary between God and society. Figure 1 shows the pictures Alvarado posted as evidence. These images convey the idea of Alvarado as the messiah who would bring the Bible (literally and figuratively) to the core of Costa Rican politics.



Figure 1. Fabricio Alvarado and his religious mentors

(posted on Facebook, January 1, 2018)

Communication Style Elements

Alvarado's communication style on Facebook was guided by the premise that the mainstream media, which he considered crucial for winning the election, were not paying sufficient attention to his campaign (Carazo et al. 2021). He envisioned the media as an indispensable ally in reaching the electorate. In an interview conducted for this study, Alvarado noted: "When you don't have resources, the money, social media are the only possibility you have to make your messages known. During the first round, we depended more than 95% on social media. It was basically Facebook that gave us the impetus."ⁱ Accordingly, Alvarado adopted primarily an informational tone in most of his posts (42.7%). Compared to Bukele (as we show below), he downplayed the use of emotional rhetoric (10.3% of posts).

Even if his low use of emotions was somewhat counterintuitive, Alvarado employed many other traditional elements of populist communications. Most of his Facebook posts were self-promotional (see Figure 2). An average of 49.5% of his posts were coded as such. In these self-referential posts, Alvarado exploited the fragmentary nature of Facebook campaigns to invite his followers to watch or follow electoral debates (26%), interviews (22%), videos (12%), or share information about meetings he had with different people (22%). In this way, he portrayed himself as a charismatic leader in touch with "the people." He occasionally used Facebook to clarify his opinions as a candidate on various issues (12% of his posts) and barely elaborated on his political plan (only 3% of posts).

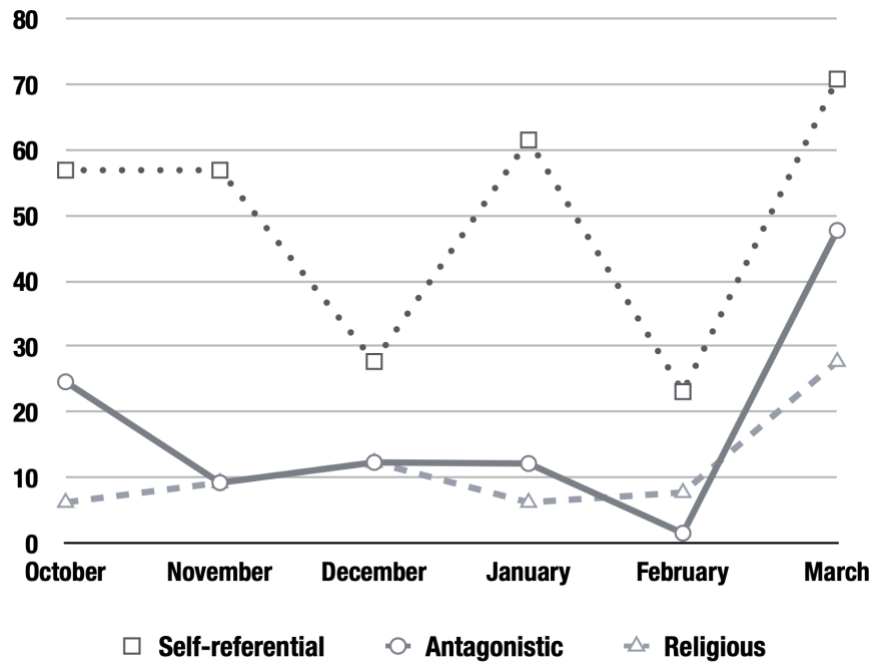


Figure 2. Type of posts in Fabricio Alvarado’s Facebook profile during the campaign 2017-2018 (in percentages)

Alvarado also attacked rivals in a strategic manner. During the first round of the election, he used antagonistic discourse on an average of 12% of posts. But in March 2018, the month leading to the second round election, he significantly increased these attacks (47.7%). A similar trend characterized his explicit mentions of religious elements on posts (from an average of 8.32% of posts during the first round to 27.7% in March 2018).

Previous research has noted the importance of simplification in populist communications (Bracciale et al. 2021). Alvarado employed this strategy by dichotomizing “us” and “them” in the products he shared on Facebook. In one video post, he used images in black and white to frame religious intolerance and progressive ideas in negative ways, but then employed images in color to refer to the traditional family values he defended. He then integrated the audience into his messianic cause by saying: “I know you share these values with me.” He concluded this post

by asserting that he would govern for every person, regardless of religious beliefs. The music in the background reminded his campaign slogan: “Let’s do it together.”

In this example, the light metaphor acquired an explicitly religious expression that positioned Alvarado as the messianic and charismatic guardian of traditional values and Christian beliefs. He used popular understandings associated with these colors to simplistically suggest there were only two options in the election: good and evil. His campaign’s slogan, “With clean hands” played with this idea to set himself apart from a corruption scandal that involved the official party a few months before the election. In this political/religious dichotomy, his political rivals remained in “darkness” (away from God). By using the adjective “*limpio*” (clean), he differentiated his campaign style from those of his opponents, which he described as “*sucia*” (“dirty” in the sense of negative and deceiving). Using a victimization strategy (Gerbaudo 2014), Alvarado also repeatedly maintained that he had been the target of fake news to diminish his chances of winning the election.

Finally, Alvarado incorporated ideograms into his communication strategies of simplification. He employed emojis that represented the symbol of his party, namely a yellow sun (☀️), along with phrases such as “The sun shines again in Costa Rica” and the hashtag “#QueSuVotoBrille” (“#MakeYourVoteShine”). In this way, Alvarado further positioned his candidacy in a visual dichotomy between light (a better Costa Rica that followed Christian values) and darkness (the current and decadent state of the country led by PAC). In this dichotomy, he represented God’s chosen one to restore Costa Rica’s luminous path.

This discourse found great support among Alvarado’s congregational political community on Facebook. Commentators wrote to endorse his opposition to the Inter-American Court as a matter of national sovereignty. In their view, God’s will needed to be defended by

“the people,” even against international democratic institutions and laws. Those who commented on Facebook did not necessarily hail the candidate as the most experienced or prepared to govern Costa Rica, but rather as God’s chosen one. Accordingly, “God” was the second most-used term in the comments section of Alvarado’s Facebook profile during the campaign, after the name of the candidate (Siles et al. 2019). Commentators expressed their conviction that God had chosen and prepared Alvarado and would protect him against attacks.

Nayib Bukele: A Crusade Against “The Usual Suspects”

El Salvador returned to democracy in 1992 after a long civil war. The recurrence of issues around the election of magistrates in the Supreme Electoral Court, electoral violence (particularly in local elections), and constant discussions of fraud point to the relative instability of core democratic institutions in the country.

In El Salvador, exactly half of the population define themselves as Catholics but, compared to Costa Rica, a larger segment of the population (38%) say they are Evangelicals (UIDOP, 2009). The country has the third highest share of Evangelicals in Latin America (Boas 2020). Although the number of churches has increased exponentially since the 1960s, this has not translated into the formation of major Evangelical political parties (Pérez 2019). According to Bermúdez (2018: 295), this is because the churches “don’t consider [their] role to be involved institutionally in processes that, a priori and fatalistically, they assume to be corrupt.” This does not mean that politics and religion have remained distinct spheres. As Bermúdez (2018) puts it, the blessing of both Evangelical and Catholic churches provides significant political capital to whoever it is granted. Obtaining the political approval of religious authorities is of crucial

importance in El Salvador, given that churches are the most trusted institutions by Salvadorans after the military.

Since the return to democracy, both right-wing and left-wing parties have consistently sought military participation in public security activities by exploiting a Constitutional right granted for exceptional circumstances. Between 2003 and 2014, at least a dozen presidential decrees were enacted to allow military intervention in years-long plans to deal with criminal activity and drug trafficking (Cajina and Orozco 2015). As Aguilar (2017) notes, this has allowed the military to show it retains political power in Salvadorian society.

Nayib Bukele was 37 years old at the time of El Salvador's campaign. He is the son of a Palestinian father and a Catholic mother. A businessman and publicist, he collaborated for more than a decade with the communications team of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), one of El Salvador's two major political parties. He was then elected mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012-2015) and San Salvador (2015-2018), representing FMLN. After being expelled from this party in 2017, he announced on YouTube the foundation of *Nuevas Ideas* to participate in the 2019 presidential election. Since El Salvador's Supreme Electoral Court did not authorize this new party in time for Bukele to register his candidacy, he made an alliance with GANA to run for office. Bukele won El Salvador's presidency with an absolute majority (53% of the votes) in the first round of the election, thus ending 27 years of bipartisanship. However, as Cativo (2019: 127) notes, "a little over half of the registered Salvadoran populace (53%) refrained from going to the polls" in the 2019 election.

Ideology Elements

Like Alvarado, Bukele distinguished between “us” (the Salvadoran people, who he represented) and “them” (a corrupt bipartisanship and electoral institutions) in his Facebook campaign. He appealed to “the people” to further establish this distinction: “Our movement is that of Salvadoran people,” he wrote. He described his campaign as “the biggest popular organization” to convince voters to follow and join his messianic crusade, not in restoring the country to a previous condition, but rather in establishing a new and better reality. He captured this goal with phrases such as “Let’s change the country” or “It’s time to leave behind the past of sadness and violence.”

He employed the phrase “the usual suspects” (*los mismos de siempre*) to negatively characterize his “enemies”: political parties ARENA and FMLN, and their presidential candidates. When he employed Facebook to attack the elites, he mentioned these parties either individually or combined 90% of the time. Using this strategy, he linked together a conservative and a left-wing party to position himself as a candidate who had God’s support to transcend the established political order. He repeatedly referred to ARENA’s campaign as “dirty.” For example, in the second month of the campaign, Bukele posted:

ARENA, in its dirty campaign, has been editing videos to make it seem like people have said things they have never said. [...] That’s the “campaign of proposals” they say they do. You draw your own conclusions. The truth will always triumph over the lie. Thank God.

Bukele also included El Salvador’s Supreme Electoral Court as part of those “enemies.” He blamed the Court for putting obstacles to his candidacy (by not authorizing his new political party in time for him to register as a candidate). He explicitly mentioned the term “fraud” to label

the behavior of the Supreme Electoral Court: “Now that we have the strength of the people and as always the help of God. Now let’s stop them and say with all our might: NO TO FRAUD!”

Bukele solidified this populist dichotomy in two main ways. First, he presented himself as a victim or martyr of his “enemies.” Like Alvarado, Bukele accused his rivals of fabricating fake news to hurt his chances of winning the election. He used these accusations to frame himself as a messiah, God’s representative who had to battle illegal obstacles from his adversaries. As Manjarrés Ramos (2020) shows, performing the role of the messiah has allowed politicians to position themselves as emissaries who have both a historic and divine mission. Second, he employed this dichotomy to further establish himself as a political outsider. He typically dressed in jeans, leather jackets, sunglasses, and backward hats thus performing the role of a “millennial” who, by virtue of his age, could represent a “fresh voice” in Salvadoran politics (Navas 2020; Wolf 2021).

Bukele’s ideological populism implemented a particular version of the “God strategy” through which sought to activate the religious identities of various groups (Domke and Coe 2008). On the one hand, he accused the “others” of “dirty” campaign when they mentioned his family connections to Islam. In response, Bukele publicly condemned the use of God’s name for political reasons and warned his opponents about the ill consequences of their actions (i.e., pretending to be religious to win the election). On the other hand, and unlike Alvarado, who clearly and consistently defined himself as an Evangelical who could also represent Catholics, Bukele was strategically ambiguous in explanations of his religious convictions (c.f. Fitzgerald, 1997). He avoided explicating his beliefs and presented himself as “not a religious person” or a “follower of God’s word” who would simply rely on God’s guidance to lead the country as a president. Adapting Oualalou’s (2019) maxim about Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro becoming

Evangelical while remaining Catholic, it could be said that Bukele became Christian while remaining Muslim and everything else.

Rather than specifying any religion or denomination, Bukele suggested he had the approval of *all* religions in El Salvador. One month before the election, he posted a series of photographs that showed him either in the churches of various religions or interacting with their leaders (see figure 3). He used these images to show his “followers” that he had a personal relationship with God that transcended the boundaries of one specific religion. These photographs also legitimized Bukele’s charisma as certified by church authorities. He performed the role of the political leader *par excellence*, a politician whose natural “vocation” was recognized even by religious authorities. Bukele concluded this post by noting that, if he were to win the election, it could only be because of God’s will. He wrote: “If God wants our country to change and the people who bear this beautiful name, El Salvador, to have justice and prosperity, then he will give us the victory.” Bukele turned the blessing of these churches into political capital (Bermúdez 2018). He typically drew on vague religious vocabulary to sacralize his campaign, which he often described as an “act of faith” in itself.



Figure 3. Bukele receives the blessing from Evangelical and Catholic churches
(posted on Facebook, January 9, 2019)

Communication Style Elements

Bukele's most distinctive communications feature was antagonistic discourse. He employed Facebook mostly to criticize his rivals and promote his image as a candidate. Figure 4 shows the importance of antagonistic discourse in his profile during the campaign. An average of

32.2% of his posts during the campaign were coded as such. Importantly, this percentage increased over time. By the end of the campaign, the number of antagonistic posts had doubled compared to its beginning.

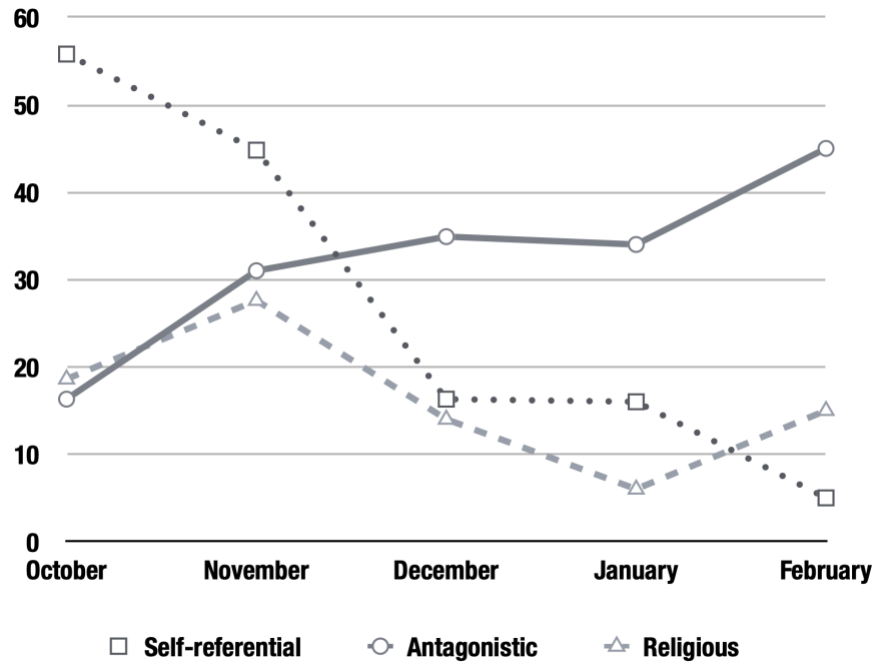


Figure 4. Type of posts in Nayib Bukele’s Facebook profile during the campaign 2018-2019 (in percentages)

Self-referential posts diminished as Bukele’s campaign unfolded. Figure 4 suggests a strategic change in the campaign’s discourse: antagonism gradually replaced self-promotion. He often combined both antagonistic discourse and self-referential messages to present himself in a good light compared to his rivals.

Like Alvarado, Bukele did not employ Facebook to elaborate on specific aspects of his political plan (only 4.9% of posts) nor to clarify his opinions as a candidate on various issues (5.4% of his posts). Those ideas were primarily discussed in a television program created for the campaign, called *Nuevas Ideas TV* (New Ideas TV), which aired various times a week on national television. Bukele did not hesitate to refer to *Nuevas Ideas TV* as “a program to listen to

the voice of the people.” Compared to Alvarado, Bukele employed an emotional tone--a trademark of the sacralization of politics (Chapp 2012)--much more often (22.2% of posts) and was less informative (24.9% of posts).

Another important aspect of Bukele’s communication style on Facebook was his use of social media as an actor in the campaign. Not only did he employ social media extensively and strategically to promote his candidacy but made sure to bring attention to the role and significance of digital media in empowering his campaign. In one “Facebook Live,” he asserted he would create the “biggest popular organization” by applying “technology to the territory.”

By bringing attention to the place of social media in his campaign, Bukele sought to portray himself as technologically savvy in the language of younger segments of the public (Grassetti 2020). Both Bukele and his communications team have emphasized his involvement in writing content for his social media profiles and located his alleged ability with technology in an essentialist “millennial” ethos (Navas 2020). Sofía Medina, Bukele’s Secretary of Communications, noted: “[Bukele] has always managed his social [media profiles], generated his posts, tweets and chosen the photos, among other things [...] The tendency and the curiosity of being connected motivated him, he’s always been more of a technological person” (Alba 2020: 271). Not surprisingly, then, taking a selfie before addressing the audience was his first public act when he won the election, just like he did in his speech at the United Nations Assembly in 2019 and in early 2020 when he entered the Legislative Assembly with the military.

Discussion

The relationship between populism, religion, and social media has been framed mostly in terms of elective affinity (Gerbaudo 2018; Hopster 2020; Siles et al. 2021). As a supplement, we

argue that the notion of mutual influence more aptly captures the interactions between them (see Figure 5). Williams and Alexander (1994: 1) arrived at a similar conclusion in their analysis of how “religious language was interwoven in the ideological frames of Populist thought” in late nineteenth-century America. In the case of recent presidential elections in Costa Rica and El Salvador, populism gave political validity to religious discourse, while a religious imaginary provided populism with charismatic and messianic authority. This populist/religious reason found an ideal expression in social media and, simultaneously, was resignified by the features of platforms such as Facebook. In the remainder of this paper, we develop this argument with more detail.

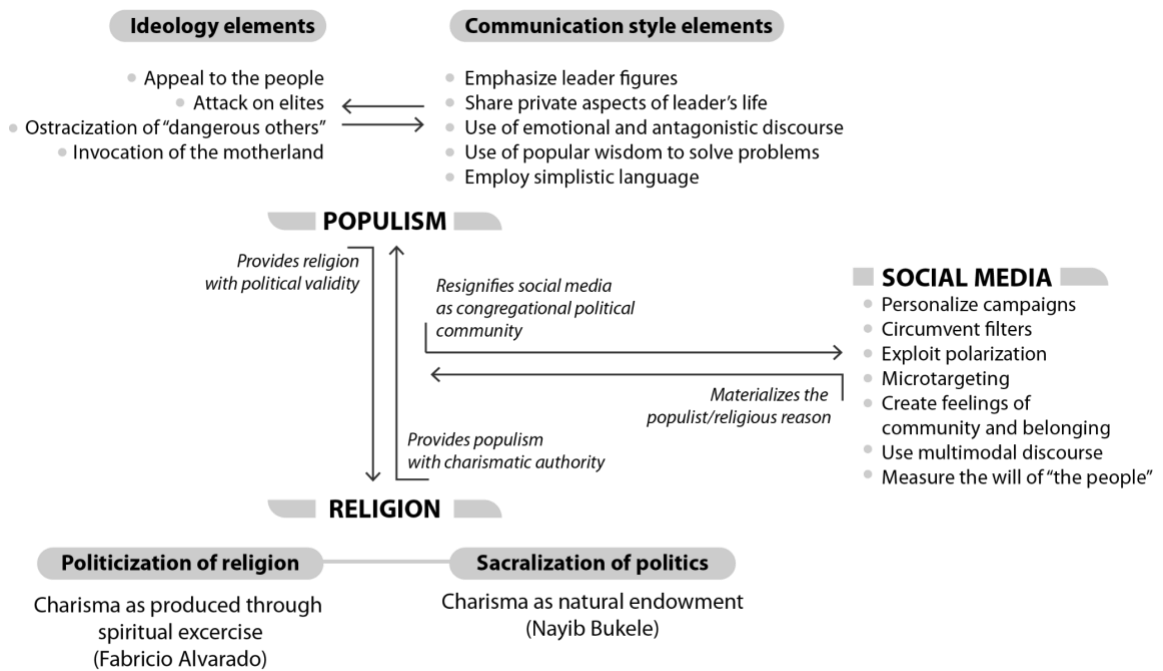


Figure 5. Mutual shaping between populism, religion, and social media

On the one hand, populism gave political legitimacy to the religious beliefs advocated by Alvarado and Bukele; it provided them with ideological and communication resources to tie a religious agenda to the world of politics. Both candidates activated religious beliefs as an engine

of vote. Populism also provided them with elements to amplify issues of discontent in the electorate. Alvarado and Bukele thus exploited accusations of corruption through a populist rhetoric and relied on antagonistic discourse to position this issue in the campaign's agenda. The success of Evangelical discourse relies in part on how it focuses on attending "extra-religious" needs (Pineda 2019). Alvarado and Bukele employed populism precisely to anchor religious expectations in the realm of earthly politics.

On the other hand, religious imaginaries provided Alvarado and Bukele with charismatic authority, as well as cultural and discursive resources. Both candidates sought to bolster support from key constituencies through religious discourse by showing themselves as charismatic leaders. In Alvarado's case, charisma was produced through the practice of Evangelical spirituality. For Bukele, it was a natural endowment certified by church authorities. They employed their charisma to demand that "the people" abandon traditional political figures and trusted them instead. For this reason, it became crucial for both to demonstrate they were God's chosen ones. Both candidates seemed more focused on establishing this idea in the electorate than in discussing political proposals (at least on their Facebook profiles).

Given its centrality in the religious ideal of leadership (particularly Evangelical), the notion of the messiah was also key in performing the identities of these candidates. Both politicians exploited it to give new meanings to the role of the political outsider. They also employed the messianic identity to portray themselves as victims of corrupt political classes that sought to defeat them through "dirty" campaigns and fake news. In response, both candidates demonized their opponents by situating "them" on the "dark" side of history compared to their campaigns, which had been blessed by God and religious authorities. Alvarado did not hesitate to perform his identity as an experienced Evangelical preacher to prove his charisma, interpellate

his audiences as a religious political community, and elicit an emotional response from them. This dynamic acquired greater resonance in the context of countries with a vast majority of Christians.

In addition to issues of charisma, authority, and identity, the dichotomic nature of Christian religion (which separates “the people” from God’s chosen representatives) also offered these candidates a binary that easily overlapped with populist politics. In the context of presidential elections, this binary has acted as a fuel to further polarize the electorate with respect to political issues that have acquired an explicitly religious framing (such as sexual orientation and social values) (Guevara 2020). In this way, the Bible has become a crucial symbol of populist politics: Alvarado brought it with him to Costa Rica’s Legislative Assembly and Bukele carried it during his inauguration in El Salvador. In the specific case of Latin America, religion has also provided populism with a means to get closer to the most disadvantaged people and foster a sense of distance from “corrupt” elites.

Facebook offered a set of affordances to blend populism and religion in particular ways. For example, it provided Alvarado with a means to quickly respond to the opinion of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights with a call to political/religious war. Both candidates also implemented strategies to exploit Facebook’s possibilities for fragmented communication through which they combined stylistic elements, multimodal resources, themes, and tones to personalize their campaigns, display their charismatic leadership, and offer the possibility to both follow and become involved in their crusades.

By turning to religion, the populism of Alvarado and Bukele drew on “universal verities” (Williams 1996) or “‘totalizing visions’ in the form of a quest for redemption from and transcendence over increased globalized disruption and materialism” (Zúquete 2013: 267).

Whereas Alvarado worked to bring a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible to the heart of Costa Rican politics and restore lost religious values, Bukele infused Salvadoran politics with religious imaginaries to show that God had chosen him as the new president. In addition to providing a means to materialize these “universal verities,” Facebook’s identity in the campaigns was also shaped by them. The crusades of Alvarado and Bukele resignified the affordances of Facebook by turning this platform into a place where congregational political communities could meet and express their support to their messiahs. Facebook became the place for sustaining the notion that candidates had the support of “the people” as a political/religious community (Siles et al. 2019).

The combination of populist discourse and religious imaginaries has gained strength in Latin America (Manjarrés Ramos 2020; Oualalou 2019). Future comparative research could shed light on how candidates develop differentiated strategies for multiple social media platforms when situated in different positions of the continuum between the politicization of religion and the sacralization of politics. Studies could also analyze how members of the public experience a sense of belonging into congregational political communities and the role of these communities in various electoral outcomes. Through this exploration, we hope to have contributed to theorizing the populist/religious reason and its significance in different parts of the world.

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Endnotes

¹ Interview with the authors, April 30, 2019.