

# Political polarization and emotion rhetoric in the US presidential transition: A comparative study of Trump and Biden on *Twitter* and the post-election impact on the public

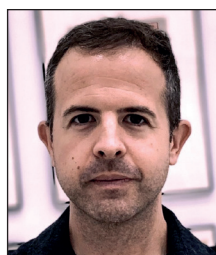
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Recommended citation:

Domínguez-García, Ricardo; Méndez-Muros, Sandra; Pérez-Curiel, Concha; Hinojosa-Becerra, Mónica (2023). "Political polarization and emotion rhetoric in the US presidential transition: A comparative study of Trump and Biden on *Twitter* and the post-election impact on the public". *Profesional de la información*, v. 32, n. 6, e320606.  
<https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2023.nov.06>

Manuscript received on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2023  
Accepted on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2023



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## Abstract

The pictures of the US Capitol attack, on January 6, 2021, represent a before and after in a country marked by the culture of political polarization. Following a presidential campaign based on misinformation and accusations of electoral fraud by Republican candidate Donald Trump, the level of maximum polarization causes a climate of social rupture. Faced with this, the Democratic candidate and winner of the elections, Joe Biden, projects a discourse of institutional stability and legality as a strategy before public opinion. Two years later, the abrupt division of the US electorate is evident, with a significant percentage of Republican voters questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process. The objective of this research is to find out the strategies of political polarization deployed by Donald Trump and Joe Biden on *Twitter* in the 2020-2021 presidential transition period, as well as the public's response. Based on a general sample of 1,060 tweets, a comparative content analysis methodology with a triple approach (quantitative-qualitative-discursive) is applied, based on the study of themes, emotions, and the ability to go viral of the messages of both political leaders. The results confirm a Trump's speech defined by polarization, misinformation and the attack on the democratic system, relegating information from his presidential administration in the last months of his term to the background. On the contrary, Biden avoids confrontation and reinforces his legitimacy as president-elect, by announcing management measures of the future government. The engagement value of the social audience on *Twitter* is also added, with a position of support for the winner of the elections.



## Keywords

Politicization; Political communication; Polarization; Rhetoric; Elections; USA; Donald Trump; Joe Biden; *Twitter*; Emotions; Strategies; Democracy; Post-election impact; Citizens; Audiences.

### Funding

This research is a result of the R&D project with reference PID2020-119492GB-I00 funded by the *Ministry of Science and Innovation (MCIN)* of Spain, the *State Research Agency (AEI)* /10.13039/501100011033/ and the *European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)* “A way of making Europe.”

## 1. Introduction

The attempts of the former president of the United States and Republican candidate Donald Trump to reverse the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, the discourse of election fraud, and the conspiracy theories unleashed on social networks against the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, confirm the reinvigoration of political polarization as an identity value of American society (Wanvik; Haarstad, 2021). This climate of confrontation reached its peak with the assault on the Capitol in Washington, DC (Rapoport, 2021), on January 6, 2021, by a sector of the Republican electorate incited by Trump himself (Fuchs, 2021), which reveals the weakness of the democratic institutions (Levitsky; Ziblatt, 2018).

Two years later, after Trump’s announcement that he would be running again in the 2024 elections, polling data (Pew Research Center, 2022) confirmed the erosion of the American citizenry’s trust, with only 37% of Republican voters trusting the mail-in ballot compared with 88% of Democrats, and with 60% of the conservative party backing Trumpism.

In an era marked by post-truth and ignorance (McGoey, 2012) in an already highly polarized society (Fiorina; Abrams, 2008; Neudert; Marchal, 2019), the delegitimization of one’s opponent as a traditional formula for political propaganda and the use of lies as an electoral strategy (Waisbord, 2018), especially on social networks (Crilley; Gillespie, 2019), took on special significance in the 2020 US presidential elections—a background that may explain the current context of political polarization in the United States (Newman et al., 2022).

In the 2016 presidential election, disinformation was a constant feature of political discourse (Roth, 2018). Public institutions warned of the danger to representative democracy (Mounk, 2018), and *Twitter* announced a whole series of sanctions for those who used fake news to interfere with the election campaign (Gadde; Beukpour, 2020). The suspension of Donald Trump’s account following the report of manipulation on social networks during the Capitol Hill assault is a measure that encourages an ideological clash among the citizenry (Anderson, M., 2021).

From the perspective of the US mainstream media, the confusion of the electorate in public opinion polls (CNN, 2020) punctuates *Twitter*’s involvement in the fight against disinformation and election fraud (Vizoso; Vaz-Álvarez; López-García, 2021). One example of this is the statements by Rupert Murdoch, president of the ultra-conservative *Fox News* network, who admitted under oath that some guest commentators endorsed false statements about the alleged electoral theft of 2020 (Sánchez-Vallejo, 2023).

In-depth analysis of the last presidential elections held in the United States in 2020 highlights the political strategies formulated by the Republican and Democratic candidates. In Trump’s case, the use of a narrative based on falsehood (Neville-Shepard, 2019), simplicity, emotion, making an appeal, and equivocation (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Fuentes-Rodríguez, 2016) is consistent with the leader’s influence over 80% of the American electorate who embrace the fraud theory, according to various post-election polling reports (Balz; Clement; Guskin, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020a; *The Economist*, 2020). Meanwhile, the Democratic leader’s objective focused on legitimizing the electoral process (Domínguez-García; Rivas-de-Roca; Pérez-Curiel, 2023) and developing a consensus approach based on the idea that “America is back” (Pew Research Center, 2022)—a dynamic that has fostered citizens’ trust in public institutions (Schulte-Cloos; Leininger, 2022) and promoted the triumph of representative democracy (Runciman, 2018).

Based on the hypothesis of the impact that Trump’s political discourse regarding the delegitimization of the US electoral system has had on citizens, the general objective of this research is to compare the two presidential candidates’ political strategies on *Twitter*, analyze the use of emotional rhetoric, and measure the levels of citizen response, in a context in which polarization reached a significant level, pinpointing the voting culture of the American public before the elections.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Institutional crisis: Political polarization and leadership styles

The debate on social networks surrounding the illegitimacy of the results of the 2020 US election was accompanied by terms such as “fraud” and “conspiracy” (Fajardo-Trigueros; Rivas-de-Roca, 2020), which helped show how divided the electorate was (Kovach; Rosenstiel, 2007). However, public partisanship is much more worrisome in the current political

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context. In terms of social unity, democracy in the United States is in conflict, and society is divided. The *Pew Research Center* survey highlighted that the political system is particularly polarized. The ideology and differences between Democrats and Republicans have increased in recent years resulting in a crisis of liberalism (Nye, 2017).

This was clearly expressed in discussions about the accuracy of vote counting and was reflected in polls (Schaeffer, 2020) and surveys published in the media (Balz; Clement; Guskin, 2021), where the majority of respondents (59%) felt that the election process was handled correctly and only 21% of Trump supporters –he was the most voted for Republican candidate in history (47.5%)– supported his course of action.

Joe Biden and Donald Trump have been studied from the perspective of discursive rhetoric (Derki, 2022) and economic studies (Conway; Zubrod, 2022), although Biden has hardly been researched in comparison to Trump. Biden's campaign designed around "everyone against Trump" earned him the consolidation of his leadership (Pastor-Gómez, 2020). The *American Enterprise Institute* report and the *Pew Research Center's* survey on candidates' personal qualities show that their campaign objectives were met. Biden was perceived as the candidate who was the most honest, had the best temperament, was the best role model, was the most interested in the problems of ordinary people, and had the best plan to solve the country's problems (García-Gómez, 2021). Biden's portrayal during his candidacy was that of a politician who moved away from centrism to connect with more progressive sectors and toward integrating the *World Health Organization (WHO)*, immigrants, free health care, and vote-winning (Osnos, 2020). He also used social media –he released a video criticizing Donald Trump's lack of credibility– and gained a large following after the election. In any event, previous analyses of Biden's leadership and influence (Behrent, 2021; Griebie; Immelman, 2021) revealed a political style that was quite different from Trump's way of communicating on social networks (Savoy; Wehren, 2022).

In his inauguration speech, he used various metaphors to assure citizens that the United States would be an excellent country whatever the situation and would overcome all problems, in addition to setting himself up as a president of unity, in reference to the assault on the Capitol and in contrast to Trump. He referred to the fact that democracy had returned and needed to be cherished and protected, as it had been floundering during the previous term, so he was committed to unifying the country that had been divided in the Trump era (Boussaid, 2022). Although Biden was well received when he was elected, his approval rating has declined, and many lack confidence in the president (*Pew Research Center*, 2020b). The management of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic (Goldberg; Speizer, 2021), foreign policy (Carment; Belo, 2021), climate change (Battistoni, 2021), economic policy (Ruthardt, 2021), the alliance with European countries, the return to some international institutions, and challenging influences from China or Russia have determined his agenda.

Biden rarely occupies a central place in the European press, where he stands out for his honesty, competence, political experience, and unwavering defense of unity and concord among his fellow citizens. His respectful and well-mannered approach to interacting with others has earned him an undeserved reputation for being weak and unassertive, which is often attributed to his advanced age (Sintes-Olivella et al., 2021).

Trump has been characterized as a candidate and a president with aggressive rhetoric with a great capability to mobilize people. His style is unmistakably authoritarian, and he has a knack for posting biased messages on gender, race, and foreign policy, and attacking the media in keeping with far-right populism (Calvo et al., 2023; De-la-Torre, 2018; Manfre-di-Sánchez; Amado-Suárez; Waisbord, 2021). His personality has been studied using different approaches: marketing control, his role as a digital influencer (Alexandre; Jai-Sung-Yoo; Murthy, 2022), and the narrative of his political discourse (Gallardo-Paúls, 2018). As a leader in the *Republican Party*, he has attacked globalization, the establishment, the European Union (Mammone, 2009) and integration policies, with clear critical references to immigrants, Muslims, and refugees (Wodak, 2015), and he has taken on the media (Carlson; Robinson; Lewis, 2021), above all, the international media, having a clear contempt for the press, which he considered an opponent (Waisbord; Amado, 2017). Xenophobic statements against minorities (Fuchs, 2017), domestic policy that broke with the past and bombastic foreign policy (Ramírez-Nárdiz, 2020), the use of sensationalism (Baym, 2010), and digital populism (Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2018) are features of his discourse. That being said, if there are two elements that are linked to the former president, they are the use of social networks, among which *Twitter* stands out, to disseminate his messages (Jungherr, 2016) and extreme right-wing populism (Mudde, 2016).

After the election, the public expressed disaffection (Schulte-Cloos; Leininger, 2022) toward Trump. Post-election polls (Jones, 2021) highlight a loss of support among the electorate compared with other American presidents –only 31% gave him positive ratings after the election. Among the causes were the assault on the Capitol, the delegitimization of the elections, the second impeachment proceedings (February 2021), and the consequences of his management of the Covid-19 pandemic, which altered the flow of political communication between actors (politicians, journalists, and citizens; Van-Aelst; Blumler, 2022). He was also criticized by part of the citizenry throughout the 2020 campaign, although the legacy of his messages is still present. Statistical analysis of leading public po

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ling (Schaeffer, 2022) reveals how the Republicans' own estimation of the former president plummeted in the months following the riots and how even the facts of the assault were questioned.

## 2.2. Disinformation, social networks, and emotions

In the context of the current crisis of trust in institutions, populism, propaganda, and disinformation (Mounk, 2018) converge in the elections in Western states through a set of strategies that ramp up hoaxes (Benaissa-Pedriz, 2021) while increasing the public disaffection with institutions (Waisbord, 2018). This encourages debate on journalism's role when it comes to social responsibility. Journalism is essential when it comes to the public's awareness of reality and strengthening of the links between information and democracy (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Its purpose is to provide citizens with quality information that allows them to form an opinion and participate in politics (Kovach; Rosenstiel, 2007). Journalism today is witnessing a moment of profound transformation that necessitates promoting the hybridization and complementarity of traditional media and digital media (Chadwick, 2017; Dutta-Bergman, 2004). The proliferation of channels and platforms, the increase in the number of information providers, information saturation, and increased competition have altered the media ecosystem (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

The debate over the role of information and political knowledge in the United States (Delli-Carpini, 2000) has been supplanted by the analysis of the role of disinformation, as citizens have gone from being informed to uninformed (Anderson, C. W., 2021). The 2020 elections took place amidst a climate of disinformation that permeated the electoral environment from the beginning. Citizens' confusion was at its peak owing to the impact of media platforms (Gerbaudo, 2018; Lockwood; Mooney, 2018; Smyrniaios; Rebillard, 2019) that mimicked the activities of the media and accredited professionals (Woolley; Howard, 2017) but constrained the work of journalists as gatekeepers of information.

More recently, disinformation has been connected to the worldwide rise of populism (Humprecht; Esser; Van-Aelst, 2020), especially in America and Europe. Populist leaders benefit from the media (Blassnig *et al.*, 2019), which they leverage in a powerful and charming style (Block; Negrine, 2017). Although traditional parties continue to play their role, parliamentarism is weaker and has lost importance (Levitsky; Ziblatt, 2018; Samuels; Shugart, 2010). This poses a risk for established democracy such as that of the United States, which is based on representativeness.

Populist leaders' means of communication has been through social networks, true spheres of disinformation. The influx of disinformation on social networks (Crilley; Gillespie, 2019) along with the virality of false and anti-democratic content—for example, on *Twitter*, where the spread of hate speech is fostered—creates informational disorder (Ott, 2017), a normalized erosion of independent journalism, and a deterioration of democracy (Bennett; Livingston, 2018). This contributes to an effect known as 'confirmation bias theory', according to which users believe in false information circulating on the network as a way to confirm their own beliefs, without rationally analyzing the facts (Pennycook; Rand, 2018)—that is, they trust the editorial lines of ideologically similar media outlets that fit with their preconceived ideas, discarding other information (Sanz-Blasco; Carro-de-Francisco, 2019).

Social networks boost political polarization (Barrios-Rubio; Gutiérrez-García, 2022; Monteiro; Vaca-Narvaja, 2022) using emotions (Diez-Gracia; Sánchez-García; Martín-Román, 2023). The success of political parties' smear campaigns that use criticism and social polarization is explained by the public's fascination with negative messages. Social networks provide messages with primarily positive emotions to reaffirm ideas and messages with primarily negative emotions to lead people to reflect without modifying their pre-existing belief system. Using this logic, it is easier to validate a pre-existing opinion, even if it is a fallacy, than to seek out the truth. Therefore, populist politicians do not care whether someone proves them wrong once they have put their messages out on the public, political, and media agendas (Méndez-Muros, 2019).

The power of social media was indisputable in the 2016 US presidential election. Some traditional media outlets such as *USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* denounced Trump's populist and unethical practices on the networks, and *The Washington Post* gave him the worst rating on the dishonesty scale, observing that 64% of his statements were outright false (Pérez-Curiel; Limón-Naharro, 2019), which did not prevent him from winning the election.

In the 2020 elections, traditional media had the opportunity to come together with digital media, use social networks, reconnect with their audience, and offer fact-checked information on public issues (Marques *et al.*, 2023). The media opted to integrate social networks into their work methods to maintain ethical standards and principles of quality as a differentiating factor when it came to disinformation (Guo, 2021). Thus, a group of media outlets and news agencies (@ABC, @AP, @CBSNews, @CNN, @NBCNews, and @Reuters) promoted journalistic quality as a fundamental principle from their *Twitter* accounts (Pellegrini; Múgica, 2006). This made it possible to reinforce a common information policy, capable of uniting the public sphere, on the networks (Habermas, 2006) and, in turn, to disrupt the rhetoric of conspiracy and lies (Kaiser, 2020).

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### 3. Methodology

Given this context defined by the attempt to delegitimize the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election, which culminated in the assault on the Capitol in Washington, DC (Rapoport, 2021), and the erosion of democratic institutions (Bonikowski, 2019), the aim of this research is to discover what electoral polarization strategies leaders use in a social network environment such as that of *Twitter*, whether there is an emotional factor in political discourse, and what the impact on the social audience is. With this focus in mind, the following research questions arise:

RQ1. What discursive strategies were then-candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden using on *Twitter* following the 2020 election?

RQ2. Are feelings and emotionality a distinctive feature of the candidates' rhetoric on *Twitter*?

RQ3. How do US citizens on *Twitter* respond to the political polarization and conflict resulting from the outcome of the US elections?

With these three premises in mind, a quantitative–qualitative (Krippendorff, 2012; Silverman, 2016) and discursive (Flowerdew; Richardson, 2017; Van-Dijk, 2009) content analysis methodology (Flowerdew; Richardson, 2017; Van-Dijk, 2009) is applied, rounded out with issue frame/game frame theory (Cartwright; Stepanova; Xue, 2019). For our research, the social network *Twitter* was chosen, given its suitability for political communication during electoral processes (Campos-Domínguez, 2017) and its being the main platform on which the discourse from Donald Trump (Pérez-Curiel; Domínguez-García, 2021) and Joe Biden (Domínguez-García; Rivas-de-Roca; Pérez-Curiel, 2023) was disseminated.

The presidential transition process is analyzed with the aim of delving into the narratives constructed by Donald Trump, then president of the United States and *Republican Party* candidate for reelection, and by the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, winner of the 2020 elections. Using the application *Twitonomy*, all messages posted by both leaders on their personal accounts (@realDonaldTrump and @JoeBiden) from the day after election day (November 4, 2020) until Biden's final proclamation as president-elect of the United States (January 6, 2021) are extracted. However, to form the corpus of the research, retweets or messages from either candidates that cannot be analyzed because they contain links or references to tweets that are no longer available are discarded. In addition, in former President Trump's case, those posts that were deleted or marked as false have been removed since the network does not allow access to their virality data. Even still, the sample group is composed of 1,060 tweets posted by both leaders over a time span of 64 days, which are subsequently processed using the *IBM SPSS Statistics* (version 25) statistical analysis program.

To carry out this study, we designed a coding manual composed of nine variables and structured in three large blocks: issue frame/game frame (theme and strategies), discursiveness (feelings and tone), and message diffusion (virality). Each of these methodological strategies corresponds to one of the research questions.

Table 1. Relationship between research questions and methods

Research questions (RQ)	Indicators
(RQ1) What discursive strategies were then-candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden using on <i>Twitter</i> following the 2020 election?	Issue frame (themes)/game frame (strategies)
(RQ2) Are feelings and emotionality an distinctive feature of the candidates' rhetoric on <i>Twitter</i> ?	Discursiveness (tone and emotions)
(RQ3) How do US citizens on <i>Twitter</i> respond to the political polarization and conflict resulting from the outcome of the US elections?	Virality (retweets, likes, and replies)

To study the thematic agenda (1) and discursive strategies (2), 50 tweets were randomly pre-sampled from the general sample ( $n = 1,060$ ) to determine the main categories (Table 2). When delving into the narratives deployed by Trump and Biden, we chose to measure the bias (3) of the tweets (Yeste-Piquer; Franch, 2018), using three categories (positive, neutral, and negative) that enabled us to determine the candidates' attitude regarding the political situation of the United States and in particular the development of the electoral process.

Table 2. Categories of the thematic and strategy variables

Variable	Categories
Themes	Electoral process, economy and employment, health and Covid-19, science, social affairs, international relations, security and defense, and other
Strategies	Defense of their victory, attacks or confrontation, mobilization in the midterm elections in Georgia, electoral challenges, defense of the electoral process, dissemination of executive branch activities, announcement of measures, appeal for funds, and other

Moreover, following a previously validated model (Moret-Soler; Alonso-Muñoz; Casero-Ripollés, 2022, p. 72), the emotions (4) that the leaders displayed in each message were also evaluated. The feelings studied are fear, joy, anger, sadness, disgust, guilt, shame, pride, empathy, gratitude, hope, and other.

To evaluate the virality and influence capacity (5) of each tweet, we chose to use a formula (Pérez-Curiel; Rivas-de-Roca; Domínguez-García, 2022) that takes into account retweets, likes, and responses:

$$(\text{SUM retweets} * 2 + \text{SUM likes} + \text{SUM replies}) / \text{SUM tweets posted}$$

This formula, previously validated in various research studies, was chosen because it enables the different ways in which users can interact with messages posted on *Twitter* to be studied. In addition, it facilitates the analysis of the virality achieved by the tweets and their correlation with other variables.

#### 4. Analysis of results

This phase of the research offers an examination of the general sample of tweets posted by both leaders throughout the presidential transition process. The comparative data showed that Donald Trump was active on *Twitter*, posting 738 tweets, whereas Joe Biden had a smaller presence on this social network, with 320 messages in total. In this sense, the Republican candidate’s output was very high (with an average of 11.5 tweets per day), double that of the Democratic leader (with an average of 5 tweets per day).

As can be seen in Figure 1, there was no defined trend when it came to the frequency of posting tweets, which indicates a relationship between digital activity and the day-to-day agenda or current affairs in the moment. However, certain correlations can be drawn when it comes to the days with higher or lower content dissemination. The dates on which Donald Trump disseminated the most messages were the day on which Biden’s victory was sealed in the key state of Georgia (November 21), the day of his supporters’ rally in Washington, DC (November 14 and 15), and the day on which his lawsuits in Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Wisconsin were dismissed (November 10). By contrast, apart from New Year’s Day (December 31), the dates on which he published the fewest messages correspond to the signing of a bill –which he had originally rejected– on economic stimulus in response to the pandemic (December 28) and the day he authorized the beginning of the process of transfer of power (November 23). Interpreting these data showed that Trump’s maximum frequency of posting was related to the strategy of polarizing the public, adopting a stance of rejection or approval, and his minimum frequency of messages was related to times when he was forced to make concessions to what was happening.

Regarding the Democratic candidate, the dates with the greatest message production coincided with the major milestones of the electoral process, that is, the days after the election (November 4-7), the completion of the recount in key states such as Nevada or Pennsylvania and the beginning of the presidential transition process (November 24-25), the day he officially obtained enough certified electoral votes to win the Presidency (December 4), and the day on which the *Electoral College* proclaimed him the president-elect (December 14-15). The data showed that, in contrast, he reduced its presence on *Twitter*, or did not post any tweets at all, on certain dates that generally coincided with weekends (November 8, November 14 and 15, November 21 and 22, and December 18) or holidays, such as Christmas (December 25) and New Year’s Day (January 1). This quantification points to a certain correlation between Biden’s presence on the social network and his public agenda, reflecting that the use of *Twitter* in his overall communication strategy was planned out.

##### 4.1. Issues and strategies used by Trump and Biden

The analysis of the candidates’ thematic agendas showed a clear difference between Donald Trump and Joe Biden’s strategies (Figure 2). It was observed that the Republican leader focused his entire narrative on the outcome of the presidential elections (74%), pushing the Covid-19 pandemic (7.2%) into the background and not defending his administration when it came to issues essential to institutional discourse, such as security (3.8%) or the economy (2%). In addition, other issues such as social issues (1.5%) or science (0.3%) hardly appeared on the agenda of the then-president of the United States.

On the contrary, studying the main issues addressed by Biden showed a discourse built around a wide range of political priorities. Thus, the results showed that a majority of messages were related to the electoral process (37%), followed closely by numerous tweets on the status of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the US healthcare system (25.8%). The measures he would promote as president when it came to economic or employment matters (9%), social affairs and equality (6.8%), security and defense (5.6%), and science and the fight against climate change (4.7%) rounded out the main issues underpinning the Democratic leader’s political narrative. In both cases, it is surprising how little importance both politicians attached to their international agenda and their relationships with other world leaders.

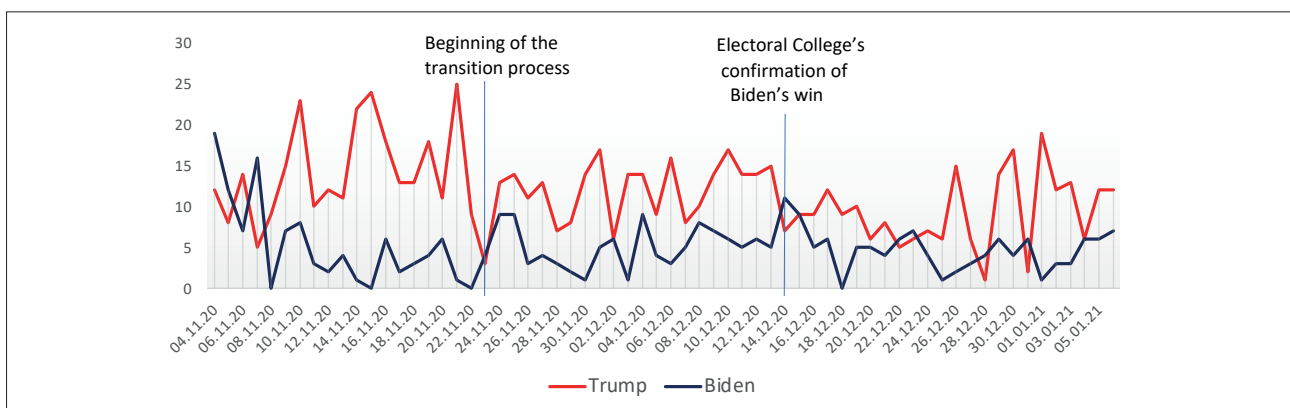


Figure 1. Daily performance in terms of the number of tweets posted per candidate

This study also allowed us to observe that there were clear divergences in the behavior of the two candidates when it came to political strategies (Figure 3). In this regard, then-President Donald Trump mostly tended to challenge the electoral process and speak out against alleged fraud (53%); to confront and attack other Republicans who refused to follow his strategy in addition to the media, the *Supreme Court*, and Biden himself (17.9%); and to defend his supposed victory (8.5%). In line with his attempt to delegitimize the electoral process through disinformation and attacks against all those whom he blamed for the alleged theft of the election, it was observed that the dissemination regarding his administration as the head of the White House became a minor theme in his discourse (8.8%).

With respect to Joe Biden, the data showed how he was trying to establish his legitimacy as the winner of the elections by announcing the key steps of the US government (38.5%). This was often complemented by a defense of the electoral process (12.4%) and of his own victory (12.7%). There was also a high percentage of Biden's messages in which he used other types of strategies (18.9%), based on humanizing the candidate and generating user engagement, with holiday greetings or messages of condolence for the death of different personalities. In contrast, it is noteworthy that Biden very rarely (4.7%) confronted the Republican candidate and outgoing president, Donald Trump, despite the conservative leader's attempts to systematically delegitimize the election result.

#### 4.2. Feelings and emotions in Trump and Biden's speech

To delve deeper into Trump and Biden's discourse during the presidential transition process, the bias of their tweets was studied (Figure 4). Taking into account the semantic load of the words that make up the messages, it was found that Trump's tone was mostly negative (62.5%), which was related to his desire to delegitimize the electoral process and to confront different leaders and institutions that did not agree with his claims. In line with his tendency to polarize, there was also a considerable percentage of positive messages (34.2%), in which he interacted with his followers, congratulated his collaborators, and publicized news from media allies, in addition to a minimal number (3.4%) of neutral tweets, almost exclusively related to announcements of his activities or his agenda.

On the contrary, studying the bias present in Biden's tweets showed a strong commitment to positive messages (72%), in which he advocated for a better future for the United States and was committed to overcoming the pandemic and the generation of wealth. In addition, there was a considerable percentage of neutral tweets (15.8%) in which the president-elect limited himself to providing information on specific issues or giving the public advice about Covid-19. On the other hand, there was a very small number of messages with a negative bias (7.1%), limited to those in which Biden criticized the outgoing president's administration or expressed his sadness over the death of personalities or tragic events.

In line with these data, the study of the emotions present in the messages of both leaders (Figure 5) showed that Trump tended toward negative emotions and Biden tended toward positive ones. Thus, the Republican candidate aimed to construct a narrative based on anger (23.4%) at the alleged election fraud, sadness (13.7%) at the inaction of the Republicans, blaming (13%) of those who participated in the alleged political deception, and disgust (9.9%) at these developments. The positive emotions that appeared were pride (11.4%) in his administration and the supposed victory he continued to defend, gratitude (8.7%) to his followers, the hope (8.4%) of overturning the electoral result, and joy (6.8%) at news that favored him.

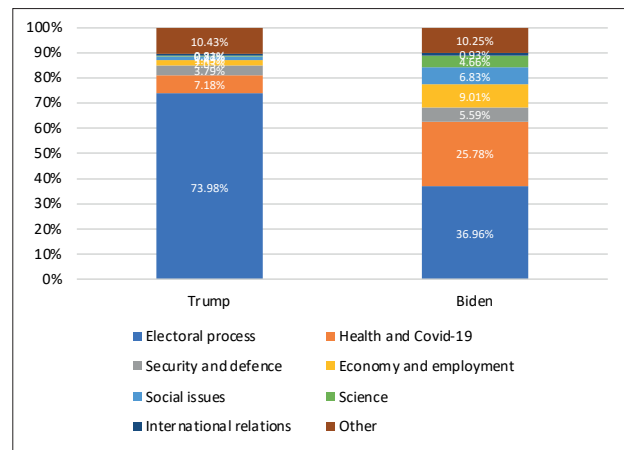


Figure 2. Distribution of themes by candidate

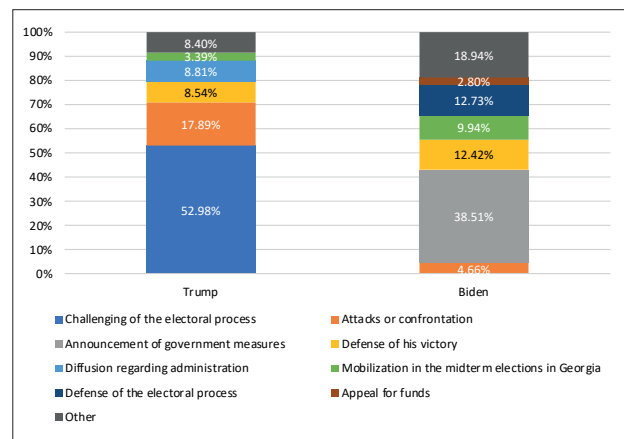


Figure 3. Comparison of strategies by candidate

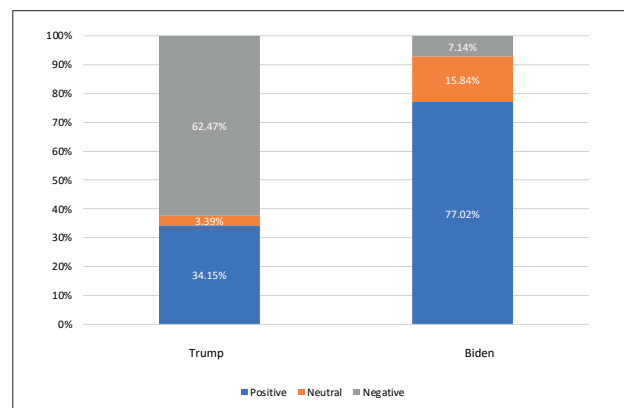


Figure 4. Candidate's tone

In contrast to Donald Trump’s negativity, the metrics indicated that Joe Biden almost entirely opted for positive sentiments, especially hope (40.1%) for the future of the country when he became President. In addition, he also tended to use pride (19.6%) for the greatness of the United States and for the quality of the team that would join him in the Executive branch, empathy (15.8%) with people who were suffering and with groups that are discriminated against, and gratitude (6.8%) to his followers. In fact, the only negative emotions seen were related to fear (3.1%), Trump’s mismanagement, sadness (2.2%) for mournful events, or disgust (0.6%) at the events of the assault on the Capitol.

### 4.3. The digital audiences’ response

Upon considering the candidates’ strategies for rallying citizens to their cause, either to delegitimize the electoral process or to establish their political legitimacy, thanks to the analysis of the virality of the tweets posted by the two leaders (Table 3), we can confirm that, in both cases, the messages had great success with the *Twitter* audience. However, the data indicated that Biden (257,508) achieved slightly higher virality than Trump (247,594). It was also observed that users interacted differently in each case, with Trump’s followers tending to retweet more (an average of 26,051 versus 17,544) and Biden’s followers preferring to interact through likes (an average of 209,840 versus 164,724). In addition, it was found that the Republican leader’s tweets generated a greater number of replies (with an average of 30,767 versus 12,581), which may be related to his great capacity to polarize.

Taking into account the different themes addressed by the candidates, we found that there was a huge public response to political events related to the electoral process (269,685), followed by health and the Covid-19 pandemic (249,646) and science and climate change (244,842). In contrast, citizens showed much less interest in the economy (160,912) or social issues (154,107). In this way, it was established that citizens interacted to a large extent with issues that concerned the democratic process or that impacted their daily lives (the pandemic) and were more reluctant to do so with issues related to promises for the future. However, disaggregating the data by each candidate, the biggest differences were observed in the public’s greater interest in Biden’s messages related to the electoral process (345,628 versus Trump’s 253,134) or the future of the country’s international relations (294,393 versus 211,490). In contrast, they interacted more with President Trump on issues related to his administration, such as social issues (239,374 versus 143,468) or security and defense (218,538 versus 131,405).

Regarding their strategies (Figure 6), the metrics showed greater user interaction with the messages regarding Biden’s defense of the legitimacy of the electoral process (474,690) and the proclamations made by both candidates about their victories (454,866). In contrast, it was striking that the Trump’s challenging of the electoral process had a lower capacity for influence on the network (244,949), although this may be related to the enormous frequency of tweets within this category, which leads to citizens interacting less. What is clear is that the strategies based around the announcement of government measures (122,170), the electoral mobilization that both did in the Georgia senatorial elections (145,481), and requests for funds (98,861) generated very little engagement. Disaggregating the data by leader, the results confirmed that citizens tended to interact much more with the messages in which Joe Biden defended his victory (590,633) than with Trump’s (368,665).

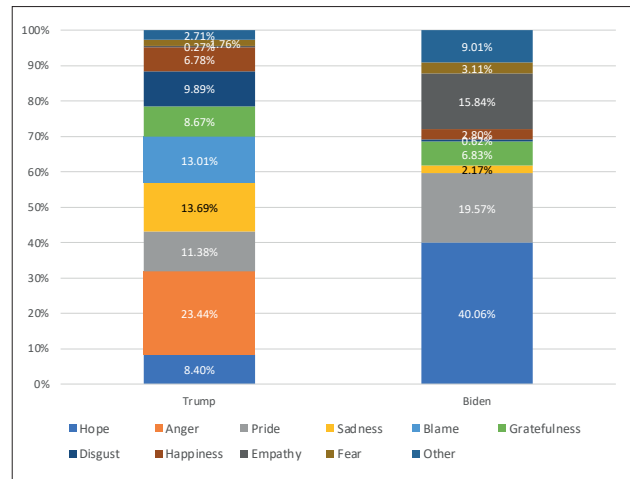


Figure 5. Typology of feelings per candidate

Table 3. Virality of tweets from Trump and Biden

	Donald Trump	Joe Biden
Tweets	738	322
Total retweets	19,225,662	5,649,038
Average retweets	26,051	17,544
Total likes	121,566,578	67,568,369
Average likes	164,724	209,840
Total replies	22,706,232	4,051,216
Average replies	30,767	12,581
Virality	247,594	257,508

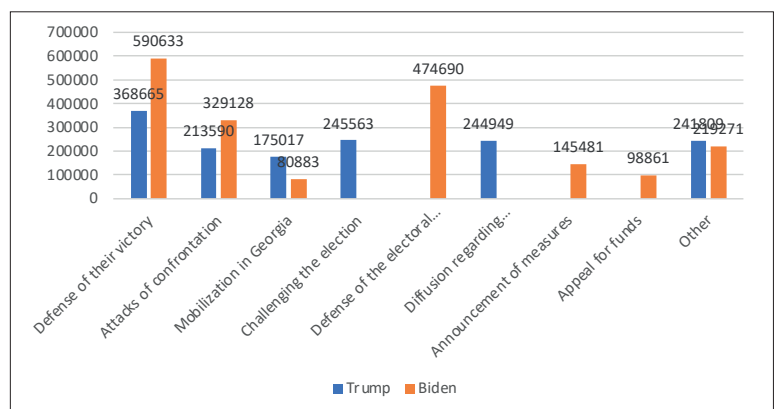


Figure 6. Virality of messages by strategy and candidate



Finally, when the tone used in the messages was taken into account, the results obtained were in line with the theory that there was a tendency toward social polarization. Citizens interacted in a similar way with both candidates, disseminating positive (254,747) and negative (252,100) messages to a greater extent and letting neutral (213,843) messages fade into the background. Moreover, the feelings that got the greatest response from audiences were empathy (343,376), fear (323,417), anger (291,696), and pride (289,294). In contrast, users interacted less with messages related to gratitude (191,542) and blaming (207,850).

More recently, disinformation has been connected to the worldwide rise of populism, especially in America and Europe. Populist leaders benefit from the media, which they leverage in a powerful and charming style

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The 2020 US presidential election was an ideal context for the study of political communication given the high rates of polarization, disinformation, and delegitimization of the electoral outcome. Within this conflict, *Twitter* emerged as an essential tool for both candidates' construction of their political narratives because it encouraged two-way communication and engagement with their followers (Alonso-Muñoz; Miquel-Segarra; Casero-Ripollés, 2016; Sánchez-Ramos; Martínez-Acebal; García-Galera, 2022).

From an interpretative perspective, the data processing met the objective of analyzing and comparing the communication strategies that Donald Trump and Joe Biden deployed on *Twitter* during the 2020 US post-election process. In this sense, the then-president of the United States and leader of the *Republican Party's* ongoing activity on this social network stood out, with his forays into conspiracy, fraud, and emotional narrative, having an impact on audiences. Comparative analysis showed that Biden had a controlled presence on the networks, balancing a discourse about security and trust in institutions as an endorsement of democracy (Levitsky; Ziblatt, 2018). A clear common denominator between the two leaders was *Twitter's* capacity in the pre- and post-electoral stage to provide direct contact with communities of followers and voters; the Republican leader's prominence on and experience in wielding this platform and his role as a political influencer in previous elections should not be forgotten (Pérez-Curiel; Limón-Naharro, 2019).

The content analysis methodological approach adds to the issue frame and game frame theory (Aalberg; Strömback; De-Vreese, 2012; Cartwright, Stepanova; Xue, 2019), which strengthens comparative study on convergence and divergence in the leaders' themes and strategies. The research confirmed the differences in the what (issue frame) and the how (game frame), answering the first research question (RQ1). Trump's political game emphasized the illegitimacy of the election and fraud rather than defending his term as president in his last months in office. For Biden, the strategic game was to build a narrative based on a wide range of policy priorities, such as healthcare, the economy, social issues, equality, diversity, and the fight against climate change. Within this dynamic, gaining the trust of the electorate without resorting to confrontation was the key to undercutting Trump's conspiratorial discourse about fraud (Spence, 2021).

Taking the previous literature on the impact of emotions on the micro-narratives of *Twitter* messages (Cossarini, 2019; Jaráiz-Gulías; López-López; Bastos-Boubeta, 2020; Rivera Otero *et al.*, 2021) as a starting point—the basis of the second research question (RQ2)—the results obtained lined up with previous research (Abramowitz; McCoy, 2019; Ross; Caldwell, 2020; Pérez-Curiel; Domínguez-García, 2021) and confirmed that his biased tone and trademark negativity were the hallmarks of Trump's posts about the illegality of the electoral process, but positive tone that he used to interact with his audience was not underestimated. There was a mixture of negative emotions such as anger, sadness, blame, and disgust that overshadowed the positive tone he used to congratulate his collaborators or support media outlets that had a similar ideology. In Biden's case, emotional traits such as hope, pride, empathy, and gratitude were a sign of confidence and security, typical of the future president of the United States. As some opinion polls (Balz; Clement; Guskin, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020a; *The Economist*, 2020) showed, Trump's polarizing attitude, the uninformative and manipulative nature of his message, and the little importance given to government administration were aspects that the Democratic electorate and some of the Republican voters viewed negatively. The peak of polarization, conspiracy, and lies was seen in the unparalleled political scenario of the assault on the Capitol, which also revealed American society's disapproval and criticism of the former president. Some 58% of Americans believed that Trump bears a great deal or a fair amount of responsibility for the events (*The Associated Press NORC Center for Public Affairs Research*, 2022).

The polarization inherent in the leaders' messages also extended to the public's response, as reflected in the third research question (RQ3). It is striking that Biden's tweets (with 20 million followers) had a slightly higher virality than Trump's (with 88 million). This may be due to Biden's importance following his victory as well as Trump's hyperactivity on *Twitter* lowering the impact of his messages. However, Trump's followers tended to retweet, which could be viewed as voter loyalty, whereas Biden's supporters opted for likes, being from more moderate sectors of the public. The comparative results highlighted Trump's ability to polarize his supporters, garnering twice as many replies as Biden.

The then-president of the United States and leader of the *Republican Party's* ongoing activity on this social network stood out, with his forays into conspiracy, fraud, and emotional narrative, having an impact on audiences

Citizens interacted more with issues of public interest, those that concerned social stability (the electoral process) or those that were a determining factor in their lives (the pandemic), as well as with Biden's tweets that reinforced the idea of electoral legitimacy, than they did with the themes related to promises for the future. It is striking, however, that the driving idea of a leading influencer like Trump –fraud in the election results– failed to convince a sector of the non-politicized citizenry, which interacted to a greater extent with Biden.

All this interpretation must be understood in a context of presidential political change in the United States, during which the winner of the election, Joe Biden, was proposing measures to consolidate the role of institutions and defend the transparency of the election process and, thereby, call into question Trump's government administration and his conspiratorial policy of fraud and delegitimization.

In short, this research helped to elucidate and disentangle the various strategies of current international politics, as well as social behavior when faced with the emergence of populism, polarization, and the erosion of institutions. Among this study's main contributions to communication studies, the analysis of the strategy that Joe Biden deployed to confront Donald Trump's polarizing discourse and Trump's delegitimization of the democratic process should be highlighted. In line with other studies (Ahmed; Amir, 2021; Siregar, 2021), a constant call for the unity of the country and an appeal to hope for a better future was observed. Another important contribution is the behavior observed in the citizens, who interacted more with the Democratic leader, confirming that his discourse resonated with the more moderate or less politicized electorate.

However, we must recognize the limitations of this research, such as the inability to analyze the totality of the messages that Trump posted on *Twitter*. The network labeled some of them as misleading, owing to the sheer number of fallacies about the electoral result, which affects the total interactivity index. Along these lines, it would also have been interesting to be able to analyze the entire presidential transition period, leading up to Biden's inauguration as the new president (January 20, 2021). The fact that *Twitter* suspended Trump's account on January 8 forced the study period to be limited to the day of the *Democrat's* formal proclamation as president-elect (January 6).

Future studies could consider the significance of the *Twitter* use in presidential transition processes in situations of high polarization and social conflict. The post-election process in Brazil, in which the outgoing president, Jair Bolsonaro, is trying to delegitimize the constitutional process in the face of Lula da Silva's victory or the images of Bolsonaro's supporters storming the country's seat of government, makes comparison with the attack on the Capitol in Washington, DC, inevitable. Along these lines, it would be useful to broaden the focus of this research to the impact that populist rhetoric has on the behavior of the digital audience on *Twitter*. Finally, it remains to be seen to what extent polarization and disinformation will continue to be key factors in the upcoming 2024 elections, in which an additional element such as political corruption will be added as another threat to democracy.

Trump's political game emphasized the illegitimacy of the election and fraud rather than defending his term as president in his last months in office. For Biden, the strategic game was to build a narrative based on a wide range of policy priorities, gaining the trust of the electorate without resorting to confrontation

Comparative analysis showed that Biden had a controlled presence on the networks, balancing a discourse about security and trust in institutions as an endorsement of democracy

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