

# The Consistency of Donald Trump Twitter Rhetoric about Immigration. Setting a Path to Spurn Migrants in the United States

## La congruencia de Donald Trump en su retórica Twitter sobre inmigración. Vía para rechazar migrantes a Estados Unidos

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### ABSTRACT

Nationalist and nativist movements throughout the world have capitalized on the wide impact of social media, especially Twitter. In the case of the United States, first as candidate and then as president, Donald Trump actively used Twitter to disseminate his views on immigration and migrants. This paper analyzes the themes and political implications of his tweets from Trump's electoral win to the end of the second year of his presidency. The authors' assumptions are that Trump's rhetoric unleashed a collective sentiment against migrants and its supporters. The findings show that some topics were retweeted massively, fueling perceptions that most Americans were against immigrant communities and their protectors. We conducted content analysis of the tweets sent by Mr. Trump as president during the first half of his presidency. We used Trump's personal Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, for this analysis. Once president, Trump continued using his personal account as a policy and political media instrument instead of the existing @POTUS account. Since Trump ran on a nativist platform, we examined his tweets with strong negative sentiments against migrants and immigration in general.

**Key words:** Trump, immigration, Twitter, populism, social media, social networks, nativist movement.

### RESUMEN

Los movimientos nacionalistas y nativistas alrededor del mundo han capitalizado un amplio impacto sobre los medios de comunicación social, especialmente Twitter. En el caso de Estados Unidos, primero como candidato y después como presidente, Donald Trump usó activamente esta red social para diseminar sus perspectivas sobre la inmigración y los migrantes. Este artículo analiza los temas e implicaciones políticas de los tweets de Trump desde su triunfo electoral

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hasta el final del segundo año de su presidencia. Los autores afirman que la retórica de Trump desató un sentimiento colectivo contra los migrantes y quienes los apoyan. Los hallazgos muestran que algunos tópicos se retweetearon masivamente, avivando las percepciones de que la mayoría de los estadounidenses estaban en contra de las comunidades de inmigrantes y de quienes los protegen. Hacemos el análisis de los tweets enviados por Trump como presidente durante la primera mitad de su periodo, para lo que usamos la cuenta personal de Trump, @realDonaldTrump. Una vez en el poder, continuó usándola como si se tratara de una política y un instrumento político mediático en lugar de la cuenta que existe para eso, @POTUS. Puesto que Trump se situó en una plataforma nativista, examinamos los tweets con más fuertes sentimientos negativos contra los migrantes y la inmigración en general.

**Palabras clave:** Trump, inmigración, Twitter, populismo, medios de comunicación social, redes sociales, movimiento nativista.

## INTRODUCTION

Elected governmental officials have used social media more actively in recent years, as they post information, perspectives, or commentaries on official accounts. However, few have used personal accounts to present personal views or policy standpoints and recommendations on Twitter; this is often because of the potential for rapid attacks and backlash. However, Donald J. Trump stated that his use of social media was not “Presidential . . . it is Modern Day Presidential” (Trump, 2017). What the message meant is that he was willing to say anything and everything he wanted to disrupt and break all historical presidential traditions. Many observers thought that his use of Twitter as a candidate would change as soon as arrived at the White House. Instead, it got worse (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Kellner, 2016). False statements and incendiary rhetoric were used by the president on almost any topics that called his attention.

One topic was particularly troublesome for many observers: his nativist approaches toward immigration (Denvir, 2020; Pérez Huber, 2016; Demata, 2017; Young, 2017; Nguyen, 2019). Trump’s nativist narrative has been openly expressed regarding immigration, especially undocumented immigration, by promoting a view that criminalizes migrants and associates them with violence. Trump’s nativism, specifically, is aimed at his conservative base that conceives that the United States should be populated, controlled, and directed by whites. The remarkable element of his nativism is that for the first time it is expressed openly from the highest political authority of the country (Alejo, 2018). Since the announcement of his candidacy on July 15, 2015, Trump made clear that immigration was at the top of his political platform.

He started by tagging Hispanics and Muslims as the causes for all the economic, social, and political problems of the United States. Early in the campaign process, it was notorious that Trump was willing to use disinformation and populist remarks that were insulting, demeaning, offensive, and plainly discriminatory (Colley, 2019). His rhetoric took a tone that ignited a dormant anti-immigrant sentiment containing important biases, stereotypes, and racist attitudes (Marietta et al., 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2019: 68; Rivers and Ross, 2020: 832); in other words, he was appealing to the nativists who wanted to keep the country as it was in the past.

In fact, this type of discourse coincides with what is proposed in studies that delve into the distinction between right-wing and left-wing populist parties. These studies state that right-wing populisms, among which we would frame Trump, tend to use exclusionary definitions of who is part of the people, based on nativist components (strongly associated with anti-immigrant discourses); while those on the left-wing, tend to define people in more inclusive terms, using economic criteria (poor people or those experiencing economic exclusion) (Marcos, 2020).

Immigration is a problem that America has faced since its founding, whether legal or illegal—authorized or unauthorized. The last time the U.S. Congress passed immigration reform was in 1986. Since then, there is such a polarization to pass legislation that the country has been living without a comprehensive updated legal framework. It is an issue that is touted as a crisis by most Americans (Pew Research Center, 2019). Researchers found that the topic received considerable attention on Twitter—when more than 20 million tweets that matched immigration-related keywords were posted from January 20 to February 20, 2017, in the first month alone of the Trump presidency (Stocking et al., 2018). The country has 44 million foreign-born people or 13.6 percent of the total population, of which 10.5 million are unauthorized migrants (Pew Research Center, 2019). The unauthorized population is composed of people from different nationalities, including Latin Americans, Asians and Europeans. In 2017, Pew Research Center estimates show that Latin Americans, especially Mexicans are around 47 percent of the total (2019). One problem for U.S. policy makers is the estimated 1.5 million immigrants who entered the country as minors. The group was provided with a special presidential protection called the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or DACA, issued by President Obama; however, only 800,000 registered under the presidential act because they were afraid of being identified, arrested, and potentially deported (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Trump's stance on immigration was very clear. The country was being invaded by illegal migrants that were stealing jobs from Americans and those migrants were in the country to supply drugs, increase crime, and escalate sexual assaults (Flores and Chavez, 2020). Visible arrival of immigrants from Latin American countries were

targeted first, especially Mexicans, who in the eyes of Trump were indistinguishable from Central and South American migrants. Then he turned his attacks to Muslim immigrants who were in the country for nefarious purposes, in other words: to commit terrorist attacks against Americans. He, in fact, was seeking to exacerbate the fears of conservative white Americans who did not want to see different people and religions in their communities, ignoring the economic and demographic realities of the United States. Ultimately, immigration was a point of departure for Trump's political disruption of the 2016 presidential election.

Candidate and then President Trump used his personal Twitter account @realDonaldTrump to create a distorted framing of immigration by repeating snippets that highlighted the negative impacts of immigrants in the United States. The notion that Twitter reflects the democratization of media by decentralizing the spread of digital information (Rivers and Ross, 2020: 837) due to the platform's ability to post direct messages has been widely touted. The capacity of Twitter to then embed messages from other sources, redirect the reader to other websites or sources of information, or to share the tweet and to retweet the original message to other followers creates an immediate viral tool that is easy to operate. Because Twitter is free, the cost for political candidates is insignificant, and the power to disseminate at no financial cost makes it very attractive (McGregor et al., 2017; Alonso et al., 2016). In addition, Trump has been successful in bypassing journalists and the traditional media by claiming that Twitter is a tool to communicate directly with Americans (Ouyang and Waterman, 2020). Twitter, however, is not an editor that can change or correct erroneous information or plain disinformation.

During the period of this study, Twitter did not flag disinformation or misinformation; it was not until mid-2020 that the platform incorporated a new alert system aimed at warning readers about the lack of veracity or the absence of verified information of a particular tweet. The change emerged from messages related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the alerts have gained greater prominence after the 2020 U.S. presidential election, due to the President Trump accusations about widespread electoral fraud and the manipulation of results.<sup>1</sup>

Trump's uses of Twitter are not divorced from his speeches and media interviews, where he always expanded on his tweets. An analysis of Trump's tweets shows that he uses emotionally-charged words, such as "badly," "crazy," or "weak," regardless of who he is referring to. He is also less likely to use hashtags, photos or links in his tweets; in other words, he wants to establish his position as the only valid position in

<sup>1</sup> In these cases, preceded by an exclamation point, messages flagged by Twitter say, "This claim about election fraud is disputed" or "Multiple sources called this election differently."

a discussion (Robinson, 2016). Also, it is likely that others have access to the account to send messages, the subtle variation of semantics and misspelled words indicate when the president himself sent a tweet. (Ref, WP)

The use of a communication tool that allows the dissemination of information regardless of its veracity is a megaphone for populists that Twitter has facilitated (Lockhart, 2018). The rhetoric and the content can be outrageous without any filter between the politician who sends the message and the target audience. The framing and semantic writing in his tweets constantly repeat the same messages since his candidacy: immigration is the sole issue that explains all the failures of the United States. As his message became more populist, Twitter was a powerful tool to attract audience and supporters, and when he failed to provide logical and cohesive policy information, he turned to his tweets to divert attention or to attack the news media that put in evidence his errors (Colley, 2019).

This paper<sup>2</sup> examines the main topics and framing (Lakoff, 2004) used by Donald Trump as U.S. president on his Twitter account to foster his political platform on anti-immigrant attitudes which in turn bolsters nativism. The authors collected data from the @realDonaldTrump account since Mr. Trump took office of the presidency of the United States on January 20, 2017 until the end of his second year on January 20, 2019. The research fills a void in analyzing Trump messages in the context of immigration and the emergence of nationalism and explores the characteristics, frequencies, framing, and topics he has been using. The importance of the research lies in two distinctive areas: firstly, to understand how Twitter has been used to bypass and disregard the news media, which has traditionally been the mediator between political actors and the public; and secondly, to better understand Trump's communication strategy of using a single platform, specifically Twitter, to disseminate information.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research has departed from a plurality of perspectives and debates to understand the contemporary use of the concept "populism" (Ribera y Díaz, 2020). Discussion is focused on three positions: populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a form of political mobilization, and as a discursive frame (Bonikowski, 2017: 184). In terms of this study, the last perspective is the theoretical position use (Bonikowski, 2016; Aslanidis, 2016; Moffitt, 2016), because a frame is the way of presenting a

<sup>2</sup> This work is part of a broader investigation related to Trump's political discourse on Twitter about immigration and other social platforms.

message from a specific perspective in order to improve a wide impact on audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000).

Populism surged in association with mass political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Uribe, 2017). In the United States, the origins of populism are confused with the birth of the republic and Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States (1829-1837), as his first proponent (Puértolas, 2017: 114). Currently, populism is an expanding political phenomenon, both in Europe and in America (Wodak, 2015), focusing not only on the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed it, but “is part of a growing revolt against conventional politics and liberal values” (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2019: 13). In fact, populism is the symptom of the contingency of the relationship between a mass society and its political power and being able to adopt the most diverse political aspects and figures (Villacañas, 2017: 17). Specifically, Trump and Brexit have proved to be the prelude to the greatest boom of extreme right-wing populism in Europe such as: Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orban in Hungary and Santiago Abascal in Spain, among others.

However, these booming political phenomena are perceived as a new form of populism, in which the ideology loses weight in favor of the charismatic personality of the leader (Uribe, 2017: 216; Cossarini and Vallespín, 2019). This is because in their relationship with voters, their styles predominate over the contribution of political content (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). In this way, the strategy of spectacularizing politics tends to be accompanied by simplistic rhetoric (Ott, 2017), informal language (Ahmadian et al., 2017) incendiary and provocative statements (Winberg, 2017), and sometimes aggression and insults through resources such as irony and satire (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018: 1200). This results in a polarized society, creating a climate of hostility and collective mistrust (Levitsky y Ziblatt, 2018: 69).

Populist leaders use their personality characterized by certain egocentrism that marks, without a doubt, their communicative style. Trump can be seen as the most relevant example of this, by using social media as a tool to spread “his ideology” (Kreis, 2017: 608). In fact, since he announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination for the U.S. Presidency in 2015, he persistently used his personal Twitter account to communicate his political agenda, which he maintained after his arrival at the White House. He is also framing his discourse on the so-called *sharepolitica*, or to communicate by generating trending topics (Carrillo, 2017: 137), and the typical approach using negative connotations (Gross and Johnson, 2016).

Given the above, we understand the reason why social media has become a basic communication tool for Trump (Ott, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018) due to its immediacy,

its ability to spread the message and reach the general public without any filters, its potential to define the political agenda with his own issues, its power to bypass the traditional media, its ease of launching attacks on political opponents, and its perfect format for launching messages with simple and direct statements (Casero et al., 2016; Gross and Johnson, 2016; Galán, 2017). Thus, political figures use Twitter as their favorite medium of dissemination. It is commonly assumed that the possibility of interaction with user-citizens favors its use as a tool for political communication; in other words, as a strategy to approach citizens, even though previous studies show that Trump does not usually interact with the rest of the platform users, using a top-down style (Kreis, 2017: 616). Despite this, one of the features that defines populism is the struggle for the adherence and faithfulness to and from the masses (Villacañas, 2017: 18) and, to achieve this, populist leaders place special emphasis on ensuring proximity to the electorate using social media, especially Twitter.

Trump's messages on Twitter present two of the characteristics linked to the leader-followers relationship that are characteristic of populist rhetoric, which we will analyze in the following sections of this research paper.

First, he presents a strong anti-establishment and anti-political discourse (Freidenberg, 2007: 245; Wodak, 2015) as he publicly questions the functioning and fulfillment of the functions of state institutions. And secondly, Trump's discursive framework is established in terms of we-they or friend-enemy (Laclau, 2013) because there is always the possibility of a confrontational stage, challenging even the existence of opponents (Mouffe, 2010). In this sense, Trump uses Twitter to identify the enemy that he himself has generated and then places himself on the opposite side as a savior that will defeat that enemy (Carrillo, 2017: 136). This strategy is not limited to immigration; he also uses it against political opponents, in this case, Democrats, making them the enemy. When rival parties become enemies, political competition turns into war and communication tools become weapons. The result is a system that is always on the edge of rupture (Levitsky y Ziblatt, 2018: 184).

Framing analysis is a close examination of two aspects of a text: explicit and implicit. Framing is present in explicit linguistic structures of a text and also in more implicit attributes of a text, resulting in additional clarity of the communicator's intent for the choice of a specific narrative about an issue (Reese, 2007; Entman, 1993). Reese emphasizes that the comprehension of frames serves as "organizing principles" in public discourse (2001: 11), where the researchers move beyond evident meanings by decoding the structures of symbolic meaning. He argues that these meanings are stored in shared cultural values, ideas, and beliefs. Entman (1993) identifies four locations where frames can be located: communicators, text, receivers, and culture. He states that framing is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality" to make them



more salient to promote those issues and to propose remedies (Entman, 1993: 52). Entman also recognizes that framing includes the definition of a problem, forming a diagnosis, make moral judgments and suggesting solutions. A single sentence could potentially include more than one of those functions (1993: 52).

For this study, the researchers agree that frames are bigger than themes, topics, or issues because they are instruments of ideological positions (Reese, 2010: 18). In fact, they are more embedded semantic structures, which makes them more relevant across thematic contexts while still maintaining significant symbolic dominance (Hertog and McLeod, 2001: 139-41). Clearly, framing provides a good theoretical anchor to explain how Trump's messages convey meaningful content that coincides with the ideological views of many conservative communities in the United States. It is not just the simplicity of the message, but the connection with shared values and beliefs.

In the case of immigration, according to the results of other studies, Trump uses the idea of the threat "to the people and the country" of illegal immigrants who take jobs from Americans, who are terrorists that threaten the American way of life, or take advantage of the social benefits of the American system (Kreis, 2017; Winberg, 2017; Wright and Esses, 2019; Heuman and González, 2018; Béland, 2020; Lorenzetti, 2020; Campani et al., 2022). With this speech he tries to generate an anti-immigration sentiment in Americans, so people see migrants as threats to the security and peace of the United States (Peña, 2017: 209; Ariza and Gutiérrez, 2020; Demata, 2021), appealing to people's emotional side (Demertzis, 2006; Rico et al., 2017). The consequences of this "criminalization" are the foundation of Trump's original proposals for deportation of undocumented immigrants, the proposal for a wall between the U.S. and Mexico and the negotiation or cancellation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Carrasco, 2017; Dick, 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

Based on the context explained in the previous section, this research analyzes the messages published on Twitter by President Trump from his inauguration on January 20, 2017 until the end of his second year in office on January 20, 2019, with a total of 368 tweets. The objective is to examine the content of the messages—focusing on the frames used, the main approaches used, and the evaluative connotation toward immigrants in the United States. We seek to identify, in quantitative terms, the impact of messages and trends in the activity of the social media platform in relation to the objective of analysis and, in qualitative terms, their content based on a series of preestablished variables. This will be done, firstly, by analyzing the results of each



year individually and, secondly, by making a comparison between the results of both periods.

Based on these propositions, we are seeking to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 What are the salient migration areas of President Trump's tweets in his first and second year?

RQ2 What are the main targets of President Trump's tweets in his first and second year related to migration?

RQ3 What frames were used most frequently by President Trump in his first and second year?

RQ4 How did President Trump frame migration in his tweets during the first and second year?

To answer the questions posed in this investigation, the tweets were extracted using a scraper tool to select all those messages published by President Trump related to immigration policy during the first half of his term. To carry out the search, the following keywords were used: travel ban, immigration, immigrants, migrants, DACA and illegal immigration. Once the tweets were obtained, the study was conducted on two levels, one quantitative and the other qualitative. In quantitative terms the authors seek to determine the total volume of messages, and in qualitative terms we seek to further analyze the content of the messages.

For the quantitative analysis, the total number of tweets has been manually collected and counted. For the qualitative study of the content of the messages posted by President Trump, a three-coder analysis was conducted. The first was related to identifying the predominant framing in the discourse of each tweet, the variables used are the following:

1. Democrat criticism. This refers to messages with critical, derogatory, or negative content about the work of Democrats in relation to immigration policy.
2. Defense of the travel ban. This refers to the messages of support for the president's proposal to pass legislation to make entry into the United States more difficult for immigrants.
3. Trump's immigration policy. It contains the messages that refer to the different measures proposed by President Trump to control migratory movements into the country.
4. Criticism of Congress. It refers to the messages in which the president directly questions or accuses Congress of the neglect, slowness, or laxity of the legislation on immigration, specifically, in relation to DACA.

5. Criticism of the judiciary. It refers to messages in which the president questions the work of the judiciary in cases related to immigrants.
6. Criticism of the previous immigration policy. This refers to messages in which Trump launches criticism of the immigration policy of previous presidents and how this is the cause of the current problems of insecurity coupled with the number of illegal immigrants in the country.
7. Criticism of the press. This refers to the tweets posted by the president that criticize the news media organizations for their reporting on immigration, migrants, and their communities.

Of all these variables and after the complete reading of the message, one is selected since they are mutually exclusive variables. The second analysis examines the approach adopted in the message, which can be positive, negative, or neutral. As before, one is selected after reading the complete message as they are mutually exclusive variables.<sup>3</sup>

The third qualitative analysis examines the assessment that the president makes about immigrants in his messages, implicitly or explicitly. In this case, according to previous studies of Trump's speeches on immigration, they are based on the repetition of negative topics about it (Carrasco, 2017; Green, 2016; Wright and Esses, 2019). We determined the following statements: illegal, that generate insecurity, criminals, dangerous, system exploiters, rapists, drug traffickers and system abusers. Although methodologically, the variable with the greatest weight or most significant in the message will be indicated in exclusive terms, it is expected that several of them may appear superimposed in the same message with a secondary role.

## FINDINGS

After compiling the tweets related to immigration published on the personal Twitter account of President Trump, a total of 368 tweets were found for his first two years in office. Each tweet has been treated as a unit of analysis. Of these, 38 correspond to the first year in the White House, while 330 are from the second year. This first finding shows a greater emphasis on the political discourse on immigration during the second year of his presidential term. This means that 89 percent of the sample corresponds to his second year in office.

<sup>3</sup> After the categorization of all the analyzed tweets, a control phase of the results was carried out. In doing so, 15 percent of the total was selected and submitted for new coding by a researcher unrelated to the current study. The preestablished variables were considered, and a coincidence percentage was found within the ranges determined by Igartua (2006) for similar studies.

As seen in figure 1, a clear trend of criticism content is observed in immigration-related tweets posted during Trump's first year in the White House, as 66 percent of tweets include criticizing content. However, in the second year there was a significant drop in the weight of criticism content as they only accounted for 46 percent of the messages posted in that period. In this sense, it cannot be inferred that there is a reversal of critical messages since a good part of the messages expressed are in defense of his immigration policy and also criticism towards those who oppose it. In this way, it is observed how 54.2 percent of the messages of support for Trump's policy include criticism against those he considers enemies of his immigration policy. Although 45.8 percent of the messages coded in this variable do not have critical elements, it is probably because the messages are mainly in support of a Republican candidate. It is important to note that those tweets support candidates for a seat in Congress or for governor, where the candidates support the tightening of the immigration containment measures defended by Trump. However, because each tweet is considered as a unit of analysis that should only be coded in one of the preestablished variables, a categorization of support for the president's immigration policy was chosen when it had more weight than criticism in the tweet message.

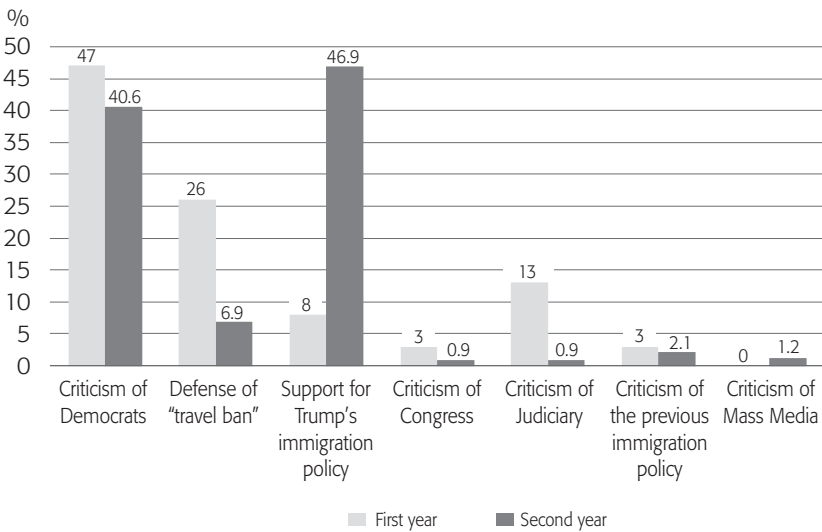
Within the messages with critical content published in both years, Democrats are the main target of his criticism since they disagree with his immigration policy and do not support his legislative proposals. Thus, 47 percent of the messages in the first year and 41 percent in the second year are directly aimed at attacking the position adopted by Democrats, as well as blaming them for the negative effect derived from the presence of immigrants in the country. In addition to the Democrats, Congress and the judiciary received criticism in both years with a relatively small 3 percent in the first year and almost 1 percent in the second; while, in the case of the judiciary, it was the target in 13 percent of the tweets the first year and a reduction to 1 percent in the second. The wide criticism Trump received for attacking Congress and the judiciary seemed to account for the reduction in his criticism.

The significance of critical messages in the study places this analysis in line with previous studies that demonstrate President Trump's tendency towards a populist, aggressive and unfounded discourse as the basis of his communication strategy on social media (Kreis, 2017; Lockhart, 2018; Ott and Dickinson, 2019; Bucy et al., 2020; Ross and Caldwell, 2020).

Criticism aside, Trump's political discourse on immigration on Twitter focused on defending both his immigration policy and his legislative proposal. The tweets related to the defense of his immigration policy went from 8 percent during the first year in the White House to 47 percent during the second year, being the most-used variable in his second year in office. This may be due to the closeness to the midterm

elections and the fulfillment of one of the fundamental objectives of electoral campaigns, which is: to defend the actions of the current administration, to “sell government actions as best possible” and his government program (Simón, 2019: 73), and ultimately his electoral promises. In fact, those messages in which the president endorsed and defended a Republican candidate in the Sun Belt states, he emphasized how those candidates were staunch defenders of his immigration policy. This event led us to classify these messages as defending Trump’s immigration policy.

**Figure 1**  
 FRAMES MOST FREQUENTLY USED BY TRUMP TWEETS RELATED TO IMMIGRATION DURING HIS FIRST AND SECOND YEAR IN OFFICE



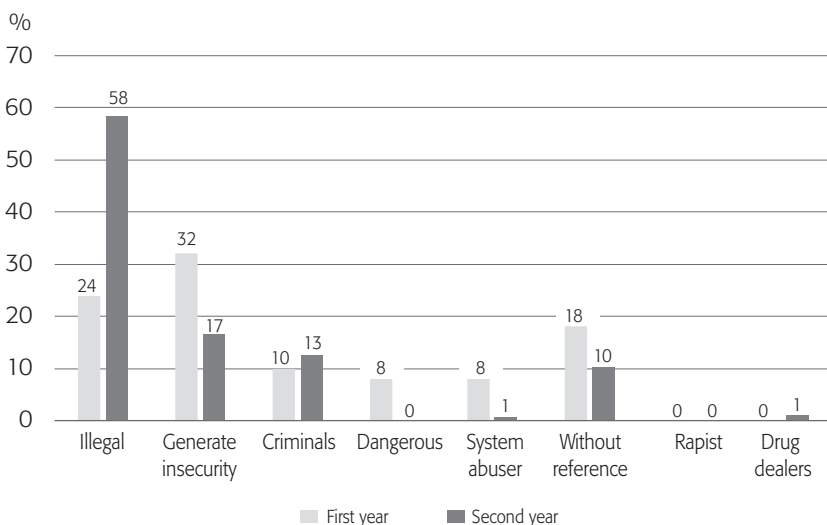
**Source:** Data extracted from Twitter and calculated by the authors.

The analysis of the messages published in both years regarding migration movements on the southern border of the United States reveals a tendency to use qualifiers, either explicitly or implicitly, with a high pejorative load. As can be seen in figure 2, only around 11 percent of the total lack a negative qualification toward immigrants, while 89 percent of the tweets refer to them mainly as illegal, criminal, dangerous and full of traffickers.

In fact, it is common to find more than one of these qualifiers simultaneously and explicitly in a good number of tweets. In these cases, the choice was made to select the variable to which Trump gave more weight in his message, thus being the

one that had the greatest impact on the researcher. Such a situation can be seen, for example, in the message published on December 31, 2018, in which he states “I campaigned on Border Security, which you cannot have without a strong and powerful Wall. Our Southern Border has long been an ‘Open Wound,’ where drugs, criminals (including human traffickers) and illegals would pour into our Country. Dems should get back here and fix now!” Or in the message published on July 30, 2018, in which he wrote “Illegal immigration is a top National Security problem. After decades of playing games, with the whole World laughing at the stupidity of our immigration laws, and with Democrats thinking... that Open Borders, large scale Crime, and abolishing ICE is good for them, we must get smart and finally do what must be done for the Safety and Security of our Country!”

**Figure 2**  
MAIN LABELS POSTED BY PRESIDENT TRUMP ABOUT IMMIGRANTS  
DURING HIS FIRST AND SECOND YEAR IN OFFICE



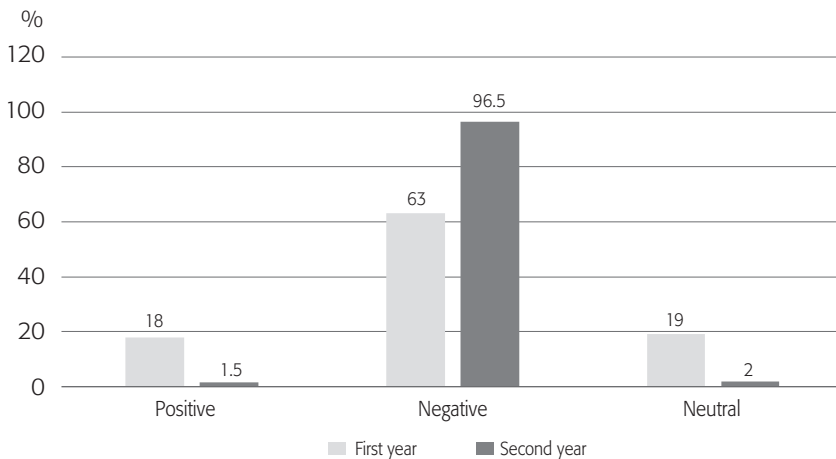
**Source:** Data extracted from Twitter and calculated by the authors.

When attention is focused on each of the two years analyzed, the two most-used variables are those that classify immigrants as illegal, 24 percent in the first year and 58 percent in the second year, and as generators of citizen insecurity 32 percent in the first year and 16 percent in the second. Thus, these two variables combined exceed 50 percent of the tweets in both years, even exceeding 70 percent in the second year. In both periods, the third most-used variable is one that classifies immigrants

as criminals, 10 percent in the first year and 12 percent in the second one). The rest of the variables with negative content (dangerous, abusers of the system and traffickers) have a lower incidence in both years, although they are still somewhat more relevant during the first year, resulting in 26 percent of the tweets in the first year and only 1.5 percent in the second year. It is manifest that Trump sought to associate any of these qualifiers with the immigrant group, which has the goal of building an idea in the collective imagination that immigrants are a group of people that is harmful to American society and against whom it is necessary to protect oneself. This serves as a justification of the construction of the border wall and the hardening of immigration law enforcement.

The analysis of Trump's tweets shows a pattern in his messages that is mostly negative. That is, he posts tweet messages in which he uses expressions, descriptors, and qualifiers that seek to point out immigrants as those responsible for the problems of crime, drug trafficking, insecurity, and problems with the immigration system in the United States. As seen in figure 3, this attitude is in crescendo, since while in the first year the number of messages with a negative perspective was 63 percent, during the second this figure skyrocketed to 95 percent. This finding coincides with the results derived from previous studies, according to which, Trump's speech is characterized by being negative, inaccurate, populist, and prone to humiliate others (Kessler et al., 2020; Lockhart, 2019).

**Figure 3**  
PERSPECTIVES OF THE TWEETS POSTED BY PRESIDENT TRUMP  
DURING HIS FIRST AND SECOND YEAR IN OFFICE



**Source:** Data extracted from Twitter and calculated by the authors.

This hardening of the approach intends, on the one hand, to put pressure on the rest of the branches of power to obtain support for his immigration policy and, on the other hand, to increase the social support of American citizens to his postulates, especially about his vision of the concept of citizenship (Lockhart, 2019).

The target recipients of Trump's political discourse on social media about immigration policy are U.S. citizens. More specifically, 68 percent of the total tweets on migration policy and 70 percent of the tweets, both in the first year and in the second year, are directed at the American public. This is mainly due to the president's objective of persuading and convincing the public both of his critical view of the political activity promoted by Democrats, as well as the benefits of his measures to control illegal immigration. Likewise, there is a clear intention of President Trump to convey his negative and stereotyped vision of all immigrants, as indicated above, linking them to frames of criminality and insecurity. In this way, by linking both elements, it is clear that Trump intends to reach the public through his slogan "Make America Great Again" by highlighting negative roles of the immigrant community and on those who prevent his measures to control immigration (Cummings, 2019).

Although Trump mostly directs his messages to all American citizens, a growing interest is observed in the second year to directly addressing the voters of specific states. In this way, compared to 7 percent in the first year, in the second year 21 percent of his tweets were focused on the voters of a select group of states with upcoming midterm elections. In this second year, Trump lent support to the southern-state Republican candidates who supported similar immigration policies. Thus, he usually acknowledged candidates tough on the border and who would fight against crime and insecurity caused by illegal immigration (Colley, 2019).

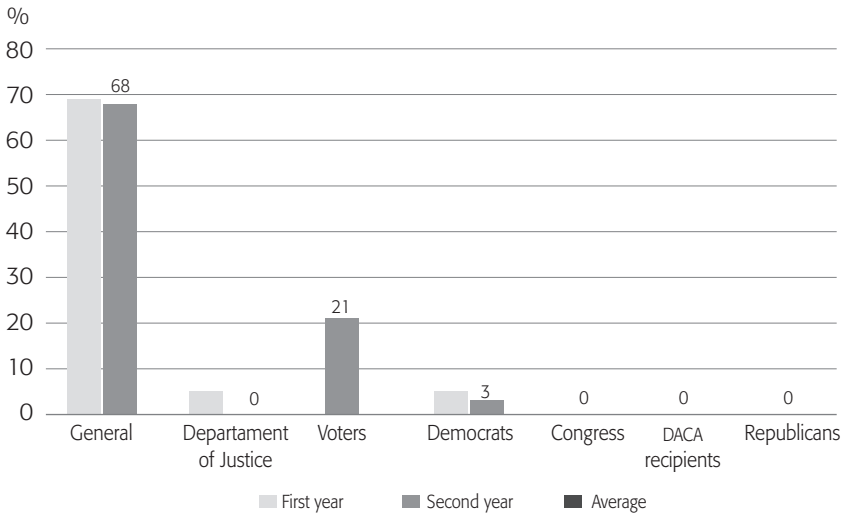
As seen in figure 4, there is also a tendency to question and criticize the other branches of power. Congress and different levels of the judiciary are questioned directly by the president in several tweets. During the first year analyzed, 5 percent of tweets addressed the Department of Justice, questioning its work related to immigrants, while in the second year these messages fell to 0.3 percent of the total. On the other hand, 11 percent of the messages in the first year and 5.1 percent of the tweets in the second are addressed to Congress, which was demanding more restrictive and forceful legislation for immigrants.

Finally, Democrats and Republicans in general are also targets of his tweets. In this sense, based on our results, the volume of tweets addressed to the opposition party and its members is much more significant. Thus, during the first year, 5 percent of messages are directed to them, compared to 3.3 percent in the second year. In those messages, the president uses his Twitter account to publicly replicate the political debate on immigration on behalf of his party and against the Democratic Party. In



this way, Trump criticizes Democrats not only for not following his policy recommendations, but for their inaction to legislate on the southern border crisis. As an example, in his message posted on January 12, 2019, he notes “We have a massive Humanitarian Crisis at our Southern Border. We will be out for a long time unless the Democrats come back from their ‘vacations’ and get back to work. I am in the White House ready to sign!”

**Figure 4**  
MAIN POLITICAL TARGETS OF PRESIDENT TRUMP  
RELATED TO IMMIGRATION



Source: Data extracted from Twitter and calculated by the authors.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After the analysis of the tweets posted by President Trump on his personal account (@realDonaldTrump) during his first two years in office, an immigration discourse characterized by the presence of a populist tone is observed. The posts are aggressive and highly critical, which seeks to offend and stigmatize the immigrant community. This research seeks to understand the political communication of President Trump and to delve into how his speech on Twitter is characterized by a populist, humiliating tone, as well as language that is exaggerated, superfluous, inaccurate, untruthful, and often unsubstantiated (Kessler et al. 2020; Lockhart, 2019).

Based on the similarities with previous studies, the present investigation yields its own results that contribute to the generation of knowledge about the use and abuse of social media by public figures (Colley, 2019; Cummings, 2019). This is because, based on the research questions posed and the results obtained, the following conclusions can be drawn: first, there is a clear tendency of Trump to publish messages with critical content directed toward immigrants and those opposed to his immigration policy. Likewise, there is a tendency to increase tweets aimed at defending his immigration policy. This pattern is evident in both years of his mandate, although in the second year the percentage of the relative weight of critical messages decreases and the weight of messages in support and defense of his immigration policy increases substantially.

In these two anchoring points of his communication, it is worth noting that the main target of his criticism is Democrats, whom he blames not only for the laxity of existing regulations on immigration but also for the impossibility of solving the problem by implementing his policy recommendations. The problem with the appeal of slogans like “Make America Great Again” and its permeation in society is that “projecting the idea that Democrats are not really Americans constitutes a frontal attack on mutual tolerance” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018: 152). On the other hand, it is also worth emphasizing how, especially during his second year in office, the defense of his immigration policy began to play a leading role in his language, revolving around two fundamental ideas: the defense of those candidates who support the tightening of the country’s immigration policies and the defense of those specific measures that the White House advocates. In this way, he intends to convince the public, through authoritative arguments and the presentation of his measures, that it is possible to put an end to the problem and that he is the only one capable of materializing it so that “Make America Great Again” is feasible.

Thus, this dichotomy between defense and criticism as priority axes of his discourse, may show an intention to polarize the immigration discourse. This is because, instead of seeking ways of understanding and consensus to reach an agreement, he chooses to create two confronting blocs between those who support him and those who do not. In other words, he exhibits increasingly distant and almost irreconcilable gaps. This is part of the trend towards affective polarization that exists in the United States, where there is less and less possibility of dialogue and agreement between Republicans and Democrats, a reality that can end up leading to deep hostility between their political supporters (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018: 146).

Secondly, the results show a highly stereotyped and pejorative image of the immigrant community. In this way through Trump tweets, directly or indirectly, he tends to classify migrants as illegal, traffickers, criminals, profiteers and dangerous. By

repeating these images, he pursues a political strategy based on fear and insecurity so that true Americans position themselves close to the measures advocated by his administration. This type of communication strategy is widely studied in the academic field on populism (Frei and Kaltwasser, 2008; Wodak, 2015; Nai, 2018). These studies propose the idea of how, through this type of discourse, it is intended to give a rather basic, simplistic, and easily understandable explanation for voters, both about the problems and of the causes of those problems. In the same way, the message is focused on more subjective, emotional, and passionate issues, to awaken less rational feelings, such as indignation, mistrust, fear and hatred, in order to keep the friend-foe dichotomy in American society (Frei and Kaltwasser, 2008: 133). This, in turn, helps to establish the framing in his political and the media agendas (Lakoff, 2004).

Third, to reach as many fellow citizens as possible through this simplistic and direct discourse, it can be seen how the primary recipient of his tweets is the general public, 70 percent in the first year and 69 percent in the second one. His intention, therefore, is to try to convince the largest number of Americans, specifically voters, that changes must be made to toughen immigration policy. He also mentions repeatedly that since immigrants are the cause of the problems of the system such as insecurity, crime, drug trafficking, and the deficiencies in public services, actions need to be tough. In addition, Twitter offers the possibility to directly reach not only followers through retweets, likes, and comments, but also others' followers and the followers of the followers, and so on, allowing exponentially multiple ways for dissemination and communication impacts. Broadcasting through Twitter makes a message easier to be perceived by platform users who are reached not because they are Trump followers, but because they question him. Thus, these messages achieve a greater impact on the public, serving as an exponential loudspeaker for his political discourse, bypassing the filters and checks of the traditional news media. In other words, he reaches audiences without any intermediary.

Fourth, the majority of the messages posted by President Trump function as negative microblogging. In fact, during the second year of his tenure, this feature became more accentuated, as the messages went from 63 percent to 96 percent with a clearly negative focus. This finding demonstrates the negative weight of the approach in Trump tweets, which is a typical element of a populist political discourse seeking to distance immigration discourse from a space to resolve social conflicts by political engagement (Mendé and Smith, 1999). However, what this type of discursive approach achieves is to increase political polarization, since it prevents the rapprochement of positions, dialogue and understanding within the political class. The problem that can emerge from this political polarization is that it can be easily transferred to the social sphere—to society at large (Hong and Kim, 2016; Bail et al., 2018). This unfortunately

means that the consequences in the long term could be a major negative impact on the coexistence and cohesion of American society.

Given the relevance of the findings derived from this study, one must also be aware of both its limits and the field of study that remains to be conducted. In this sense, on the one hand, it can be understood that the present study may be limited in relation to the selection of the sample since a series of keywords have been used for it, in such a way that they could have been left out of the analysis. In other words, similar immigration-related tweets that do not contain those words. However, this does not prevent us from highlighting the validity of the research since a rigorous method has been applied in the selection of the sample, for which the careful determination of the most relevant words is essential to achieve solid and valid results.

On the other hand, the inexistence of a framework compared to other relevant issues in Trump's political discourse and his agenda in the White House can be considered a limit. Even though this analysis could show a more complete analysis of Trump's political communication on Twitter, it is no less true that this can be covered by thematic frame studies on Trump's communication strategies. Lastly, the establishment of the time frame could be considered a limit insofar as it leaves out the second half of his term. However, two points here: the first two years of a U.S. president are the critical years to politically advance promises made during the campaign; and the sample obtained during the first two years is sufficient and allows solid conclusions to be drawn that serve as a bridge for future research that contains the president's four years in the White House, which as we know now were full of political turmoil.

To conclude, this research aims to contribute to enriching the academic literature related to the use of media platforms by political actors in North America. For us, as researchers, it is important to understand how major political actors, such as the president of the United States, shape political communication about immigration, which is considered a major national policy issue. Specifically, it is crucial to closely examine the posts in the @realDonaldTrump account and its imprint both on the American political system and on its citizenry. This, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, helps to generate a continuous analysis of the political and discursive reality, the role of social media, as well as its consequences and implications on American social fabric.

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