

Digital Populism, Polarization, and Disinformation: Gustavo Petro's Discourse on Platform X

Emily Triviño & Scarlet Gutierrez

Abstract— This article analyzes how the digital communication of Colombian President Gustavo Petro on platform X incorporates characteristic elements of digital populism, as well as understanding the articulation with dynamics of polarization and disinformation in the Colombian public debate. Based on the theoretical review of populism, political communication, and digital platforms, it is argued that X's architecture favors the circulation of messages with high emotional charge, discursive simplification, and political confrontation. Based on a review of the specialized literature and analysis of representative publications by Gustavo Petro on X, the main characteristics of digital populism in the Colombian context are examined. The results evidence the recurring presence of a discursive logic based on the opposition between "us" vs. "them", characteristic of contemporary digital populism. Similarly, the articulation between populist strategies, affective polarization dynamics, and the circulation of content associated with disinformation was identified, which tend to mutually reinforce each other within the digital environment of platform X.

Keywords— Digital populism; Disinformation; Political polarization; Social networks; Political communication; Gustavo Petro; Colombia; and Platform X.

Introduction

Social networks have transformed contemporary political communication by allowing leaders to establish a direct relationship with citizens without the intermediation of traditional media. Various social networks have become privileged scenarios for the construction of political narratives based on immediacy, personalization, and emotional mobilization, especially on X (Twitter). These characteristics have favored the expansion of forms of communication associated with digital populism, a term defined as a form of political action used on the internet and social networks to establish a direct relationship between political leaders and citizens, facilitate the mobilization of supporters, reduce the mediation of traditional actors, and reinforce dynamics of political antagonism between the people and their adversaries (European Center for Populism Studies, 2026).

In the Colombian case, Gustavo Petro stands out as one of the most active political leaders on X, with an average of more than five daily publications (Osorio, 2023). This demonstrates the president's constant activity on this network and allows him to intervene directly in the public agenda, position debate

topics, and construct discourses that achieve wide diffusion within the digital ecosystem. Due to his capacity for influence as president of Colombia, the analysis of his communication on social networks constitutes an opportunity to understand the functioning of the mechanisms used in digital populism.

Recent literature has pointed out that social networks favor the circulation of messages due to high emotional charge, discursive simplification, and political confrontation, elements closely linked to populist strategies (Cerdán-Martínez & Seni-Medina, 2024; Gonzalez & Kloth, 2024). Based on these considerations, this article analyzes how the Colombian president's communication on X incorporates characteristic elements of digital populism and the articulation with dynamics of polarization and disinformation within the Colombian public debate.

Digital Populism and Political Communication on Social Networks

Populism refers to a form of discursive construction that divides society between a morally virtuous people and the construction of an adversary who is held responsible for collective problems. According to Ruiz-Méndez (2024), populist political communication contributes to affective polarization through the discursive construction of an enemy whose political legitimacy is denied, generating identity boundaries that deepen social fragmentation.

Social networks have significantly expanded the reach of these communicative strategies. Rivera and González (2024), when analyzing the publications with the greatest interaction of five Latin American presidents on Twitter and Facebook, found that political communication on these platforms presents a strong presence of populism, polarization, and disinformation. In the case of Gustavo Petro, polarization constitutes the most frequent component of his publications (22%), followed by populism (20%) and disinformation (11%). The authors also point out that references to the logic of "us" vs. "them" represent the main feature of Petro's populist discourse. Within this discursive framework, the actors identified as "enemies" are usually associated with criminal or paramilitary groups, configuring a dichotomous representation of political reality.

Although the levels observed in Colombia are lower than those recorded in other Latin American cases, such as the example of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the discursive pattern is similar; populism functions mainly as the structuring axis of the message, while polarization and disinformation appear to be complementary phenomena. At this level, Rivera and González (2024) found that 47% of the analyzed publications simultaneously combine populism, polarization, and disinformation, while approximately 70% were disseminated through X. These results suggest that the platform's own characteristics favor the circulation of messages compatible with populist logic.

Gustavo Petro's Populist Discourse on X

In the digital era, platforms like X have become a central scenario for the dissemination of political discourse, allowing leaders to construct narratives with massive and immediate reach. In this context, the president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, has recurrently used this social network to express positions that, according to various analysts, align with characteristic elements of populism. Below, four representative tweets from Petro are examined that exemplify the dynamics of populism.

In the first case, its discursive components and their impact on the simplification of public debate are identified.

"To guarantee non-repetition, we cannot allow crime to rise to power, we have to isolate power from crime and hand power over to society. What we have to do is deepen Democracy, put Democracy in motion. To allow criminals to rise to power, one must remain silent, and to prevent it, one must be rebellious" (Petro, cited in Rivera & González, 2024).

This fragment evidences the main elements identified by Ruiz-Méndez (2024). First, a clearly defined enemy is configured "crime", presented as a threat to democracy and society. Second, the political conflict is posed in moral terms, establishing an opposition between those who remain silent in the face of said threat and those who assume a position of legitimate resistance. Finally, the discourse appeals to the people as a virtuous political subject to whom power must be delivered.

The relevance of this type of structure lies in the fact that it simplifies the complexity of political conflicts through the construction of antagonisms that are easily identifiable by the audience. Thus, public debate ceases to focus on the discussion of specific policies and becomes structured around moral categories that distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate actors.

The second example concerns Gustavo Petro's discourse in a key publication for understanding populism, focused on criticism of businessmen who support Donald Trump.

"The 500 businessmen from the Colombian, American chamber decide to reject my words and support Trump. Together, commerce places itself ahead of a rhythm against humanity. Together, it is a crime to ask that armies not turn against humanity, and it is a crime against humanity who orders it."

Already in our Colombian army there were thousands of rubber bullets and they are being played. In the insurgent guerrillas there were also thousands of rubber bullets and they are being played."

An army that fires against humanity loses all moral and ethical standing. Which country do Colombian businessmen who betray their Homeland belong to?"

Did they never have a homeland? Why do Mexican and Brazilian companies always support their president? In 1980 we became independent, leaving subservience behind in Colombia, servile to wars. They forgot who took Panama from us; they forgot that a president handed it over for simple and cheap money."

What is American diplomacy doing talking to the opposition and talking to criminals? That is imposing Colombia's constitution. The president constitutionally directs international relations; any local official who breaks this principle is only committing sedition."

To the one who acts as US ambassador in Colombia, I expressed my commercial agreement and it was fulfilled, because I keep my word, I do not let them govern from the outside my heart. Colombia is free and will continue to be free."

If the people of Colombia kneel again to Colombia, against Bolivia, we lose independence and dignity, we will stop raising the tricolor flag and the wallet for another of their own. There have always been people in Colombia who now bless the king and do not want the free Republic."

It is known from Colombia that Peronism has no other destiny than to preserve the throne or the cataclysm. I am a Peronist anywhere in the world. No one for a free land should kneel the dignity of humanity. Merchants without patriotic pride, that's why they let a genocide be consumed in Colombia."

Cursed be the soldier who turns his weapon against his people, cursed be the army that turns its weapon against humanity, the merchant without a homeland loses his money. The ruined merchant will be the one who believes that the freedom of commerce is placed above the Freedom of Humanity."

They want to preside over us again like the one who sold Panama for money. I achieved that Colombia did not lose territory again, because that is the mission of Gran Colombia, which is to unite Latin America and the Caribbean, to unite humanity from the heart of the world with dignity and freedom" (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2025).

This tweet presents a discourse with a strong populist charge, since throughout the content a dichotomous vision of political reality is presented, in which two clearly differentiated groups confront each other, on the one hand, the people, the homeland, humanity, and those who defend freedom and sovereignty; on the other, the economic elites, businessmen, foreign actors, and those sectors considered traitors to national interests.

The case described above is observed in the content of the post when the president questions the Colombian businessmen who support Donald Trump and asks, *“Which country do the Colombian businessmen who betray their Homeland belong to?”* Through this statement, businessmen are represented as a group that would have stopped defending Colombia’s interests to privilege external economic or political interests. The expression *“merchant without a homeland”* reinforces this idea and establishes a moral opposition between those who supposedly defend money and those who defend the dignity, freedom, and sovereignty of the people.

Another important populist element is the identification of internal and external enemies. Among the internal enemies are the businessmen who support Trump, officials who establish relationships with foreign actors, and those sectors considered traitors to the homeland. Among the external enemies, the United States and its diplomacy appear, presented in the tweet as a “force” that intervenes in Colombia’s internal affairs. When the president of Colombia affirms that American diplomacy would be attempting to “impose Colombia’s constitution”, he articulates a narrative in which the country is threatened by foreign powers seeking to limit its autonomy and sovereignty.

In this sense, nationalism and the defense of sovereignty constitute central elements of the discourse. References to independence, the loss of Panama, and Gran Colombia allow for the construction of a historical narrative of struggle against foreign subordination. The loss of Panama is used as an example of an alleged betrayal by political and economic elites, while the reference to Gran Colombia represents a project of Latin American and Caribbean unity. Therefore, Gustavo Petro links the defense of Colombia with a broader struggle for the independence and unity of Latin America.

This tweet evidences the way in which Gustavo Petro uses platform X to disseminate a populist narrative based on the confrontation between the people and their political adversaries, reinforcing interpretive frameworks that can intensify polarization in public debate.

The third key element in the construction of the head of state’s populist discourse is the articulation of a narrative of institutional victimization through the notion of an alleged “soft coup”.

“They have organized to carry out the coup d’état. What was announced is unfolding. It will depend on the people who elected me whether the oligarchic design becomes reality or new paths emerge. This will not be a parliamentary vote by our enemies to remove us. This will be a popular struggle”. (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2025)

In this framework, the presidential discourse contributes to the moralization of political conflict, one of the characteristic features of populist logic. Instead of presenting investigations as mechanisms inherent to the rule of law, they are interpreted as actions driven by actors seeking to affect the continuity of the government’s political project. Thus, the CNE (National Electoral Council) ceases to be defined as an electoral control body and becomes part of a structure identified with traditional elites or the so-called “establishment”. This reinterpretation simplifies the institutional complexity of the process and replaces it with a moral dichotomy between an “us”, associated with the popular will, and a “them”, identified with particular interests that seek to obstruct political change.

Consequently, the use of the “soft coup” narrative can be understood as a political communication resource that seeks to maintain the mobilization of the electoral base, strengthen the collective identity of its followers, and respond to questions from control institutions. The tweet, rather than objectively describing an institutional threat, fulfills a performative function by constructing a permanent scenario of conflict between “the people” and “the elites”, reinforcing polarization and consolidating one of the central elements of populist discourse. In this way, platform X becomes a privileged space for the articulation of narratives that legitimize presidential leadership and strengthen the antagonistic logic characteristic of contemporary populism.

The fourth example evidences how populist discourse transcends national politics and projects itself toward international scenarios.

“Mr. Netanyahu, you will go down in history as a genocidal. Dropping bombs on thousands of innocent children, women, and elderly does not make you a hero. You stand alongside those who killed millions of Jews in Europe. A genocidaire is a genocidaire, regardless of whether or not they have religion. At least try to stop the massacre”. (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2024)

This exchange on X between President Gustavo Petro and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu constitutes a representative example of how social networks potentiate polarization and facilitate the circulation of disinformation around geopolitically sensitive conflicts. The analysis of this post reveals, first, a deeply binary and dehumanizing use of language, where Petro labels Netanyahu a “genocidaire” and equates him with the perpetrators of the Holocaust, an accusation of maximum gravity that eliminates any nuance and places the Israeli leader at the extreme of the absolute

villain. For his part, Netanyahu responds by labeling Petro as “antisemitic” and “a Hamas sympathizer”, a strategy that does not refute the arguments about civilian victims in Gaza but rather disqualifies the sender to close any possibility of critical debate. Both leaders thus establish a narrative in which each side presents itself as defending justice against a monstrous adversary, fostering an identity confrontation that prevents dialogue and reinforces echo chambers among their respective followers.

To conclude this section, the format of platform X itself plays a crucial role in this dynamic, since the brevity of messages and their reactive nature favor retweeting over argumentative development. Netanyahu’s response is immediate and direct, with no room for nuance, and the loose numbers at the end of the thread remain floating without explanation, inviting speculation and allowing each faction to use them to reinforce its own narrative. Together, this exchange is not an informed debate, but a confrontation of accusations that simplifies a decades-old conflict into a Manichaeian duel between good and evil, uses sensitive data as symbols of pain without verification or context, and disqualifies the opponent instead of contrasting arguments.

In an articulated manner, the four cases analyzed evidence that the leader’s discourse on X systematically incorporates the main elements identified by the literature on populism, the construction of a dichotomy between “the people” and their adversaries, the moralization of political conflict, and the identification of internal and external enemies. Although these resources are expressed in different contexts, from debates on domestic policy to matters of international policy, all contribute to simplifying the complexity of public conflicts through binary narratives that strengthen the collective identity of followers and consolidate the antagonistic logic characteristic of digital populism.

The Emotionalization of Politics and the Logic of X

The functioning of digital populism is closely related to the communicative characteristics of digital platforms. González and Kloth (2024) argue that Gustavo Petro’s communicative style on X is characterized by a high frequency of publication, a confrontational tone, and a strong emotional charge, elements that contribute to intensifying polarization among users. Under this logic, Petro’s digital political communication is not limited to the transmission of information or the exposition of government proposals, but also functions for the construction of identities, emotions, and political antagonisms.

This dynamic coincides with what Cerdán-Martínez and Paredes (2009) have pointed out, who, drawing on the concept of the aestheticization of politics, note that political action can be organized around symbolic, emotional, and spectacular elements that privilege the construction of images and collective identities over rational deliberation on public affairs. In the digital environment, this logic acquires special relevance, because social network X favors the rapid circulation of brief, controversial, and emotionally intense messages, which can generate higher levels of interaction, response, and viralization.

In the case of Gustavo Petro, emotionality constitutes a recurrent component of his communicative strategy. His messages frequently resort to words and expressions associated with grievance, injustice, struggle, defense of the people, domination, and threat. Terms such as “people”, “oligarchy”, “empire”, “colonization”, “serfs”, “betrayal”, “war”, “genocide”, and “humanity” contribute to constructing a political narrative based on the existence of a confrontation between social groups and actors with opposing interests. This form of communication can generate diverse emotions among users, including indignation and a feeling of injustice among his followers, pride and a sense of belonging regarding the defense of a popular or national identity, and at the same time, rejection, fear, or indignation among his opponents. In this way, the same message can produce opposing emotional responses and deepen the division between digital communities.

A representative example of this logic can be observed in a message published by Gustavo Petro on X, in which he states, “*We returned to the viceroyalty and they treat us like brutes, our peoples are only good for being serfs (...), they are willing to fire missiles to appropriate the gold zones, as the Spanish colonizers used to do (...). Now they call it a pack*” (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2026). In this message, the president resorts to historical analogies between Spanish colonization and contemporary relations with the United States, presenting the political situation as a continuation of colonial domination. The expressions used in the fragment, such as “*they treat us like brutes*”, “*serfs*”, and “*pack*”, appeal to feelings of humiliation, indignation, and collective grievance, while references to missiles construct a narrative of external threat and national dispossession.

Under this premise, the use of phrases alluding to returning to the “viceroyalty” establishes a symbolic connection between the present and a past of colonial subordination. This comparison not only seeks to describe a political situation but also produces an emotional interpretation of reality; the country appears as a historically dominated community that once again faces an external threat. Consequently, users who share this interpretation may experience feelings of indignation, while those who reject the message may interpret it as

an exaggeration, a confrontational strategy, or a form of radicalization of public debate.

The consequence is that the evaluation of messages ceases to depend exclusively on their factual accuracy and comes to be largely determined by their capacity to generate emotional identification. A message can be shared, commented on, and disseminated not necessarily because its users have verified the information it contains, but because it expresses feelings with which they identify or reinforces a prior interpretation of political reality. Therefore, the popularity of a message may depend more on its capacity to activate emotions and reinforce collective identities than on the veracity of the information it transmits. Thus, emotionality becomes a central resource of digital populism, since it allows strengthening the connection between the leader and his followers, consolidating online political communities, and simultaneously intensifying polarization between groups with opposing interpretations of reality.

Populism, Polarization and Disinformation in Colombia

The relationship between populism and disinformation has been extensively documented in recent literature. Various studies agree that the dissemination of false content depends largely on its capacity to generate intense emotional reactions (Dorendro & Devi, 2025; Nanath et al., 2022). Likewise, Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrated that false news is 70% more likely to be shared on Twitter than true news. These results suggest that the very architecture of digital platforms favors the circulation of messages that evoke emotions of indignation, fear, and hope.

In the Colombian case, this situation is reinforced by the existence of echo chambers and confirmation biases that hinder the critical evaluation of information (Kenny et al., 2024; Lombana-Bermudez et al., 2022; Weber, 2021). The result is that users tend to more easily accept content that coincides with their prior beliefs and reject content that contradicts them. Therefore, digital platforms not only contribute to the selective circulation of information but can also deepen polarization between political communities and reinforce existing divisions in the Colombian public debate.

The 2022 presidential campaign offers illustrative examples of these dynamics. Cerdán-Martínez and Seni-Medina (2024) documented the circulation of multiple false news stories related to the president, including manipulated videos, altered photographs, and fabricated claims about his political proposals. Although these publications were later debunked, many managed to achieve wide dissemination because they

reinforced pre-existing perceptions among different political sectors.

The relationship between Gustavo Petro and disinformation is not limited to his condition as a receiver of false content disseminated by third parties. In some cases, the president himself has shared from his official X account publications whose authenticity was later questioned or debunked. A representative case occurred in January 2026, when Petro published a video in which soldiers of the National Army supposedly celebrated the salary increase decreed by his Government. However, shortly after, numerous users pointed out visual inconsistencies that evidenced that the material had been generated using artificial intelligence. Following the criticism, the president deleted the publication without offering a public retraction (Correa, 2026).

This episode is particularly relevant because it evidences the risks involved in disseminating unverified information from the official account of the head of state. Due to the institutional position occupied by the president of the Republic, his publications have a high potential for reach and credibility, so the circulation of manipulated content can contribute to amplifying disinformation processes before they are corrected.

To conclude, disinformation should not be understood as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as an element that interacts with the dynamics of polarization and populism present on social networks. The construction of strong political identities and the division between “us” and “them” favor contexts in which political loyalty acquires greater relevance than fact-checking. In this type of digital ecosystem, information can thus become an instrument of political dispute, used to defend one’s own group, discredit the opposition, and reinforce certain perceptions among citizens.

Echo Chambers and Confirmation Bias

This section analyzes how the existence of echo chambers and confirmation biases considerably reinforces these dynamics in the Colombian context (Weber, 2021; Kenny et al., 2024; Lombana-Bermúdez et al., 2022). X users tend to follow and interact preferentially with accounts that share their political orientations, generating homogeneous communicative environments in which information compatible with the group’s beliefs primarily circulates. Under these conditions, critical verification of information becomes subordinated to group identification, and populist messages that reinforce collective identity find a particularly receptive terrain. This dynamic can be observed in the configuration of the Colombian digital ecosystem, particularly around the figure of President Gustavo

Petro and the polarization between sectors sympathetic to and opposed to his government.

To begin with, Petro's tweets and publications tend to constitute a central axis of digital political conversation, especially when they employ confrontational language between the people and the elites. A clear example of this occurred on April 21, when, in response to opposition mobilizations, Petro associated the marches with an attempt at destabilization, moving from a democratic vision of protest to a populist narrative of soft coup, in which he stated that *"the main objective of the marches is to shout 'out Petro' and overthrow the government of change"* and labeled them as a *"soft coup that annuls the popular decision for change in 2022"* (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2026). This type of discourse reconfigures political protest as a threat to the popular mandate and strengthens the construction of an antagonism between a legitimate "people" and actors seeking to impede the materialization of political change. Subsequently, these narratives are replicated, reinterpreted, and amplified by digital communities sympathetic to the Government, further reinforcing echo chambers by strengthening interpretations favorable to the ruling party and delegitimizing criticism from the opposition.

Furthermore, another tweet published by Petro in August 2025, after the National Association of Industrialists (ANDI) did not invite him to its congress in Cartagena, Petro published a series of messages on X attacking the guild. In one of them, he established a contrast between the peasant setting where he was and that of the businessmen, stating, *"The oligarchy will have two options, either fascism or the national agreement to carry out the reforms"*. (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2025a)

Along the same lines, he deepened his criticism against the president of ANDI, Bruce Mac Master, whom he accused of wanting to keep workers with low salaries and of sabotaging the Government's reforms. Petro wrote, *"Bruce's national agreement was always an agreement of him with himself, it always consisted of keeping the worker with a low salary"*. He also described him as part of a *"pseudo-business class that lives off the state, does not pay taxes"* and that has ended up in *"anachronistic and totalitarian ideologies"* (Petro [@petrogustavo], 2025b). In contrast to the *"true business class"* to which, according to him, his government extends a hand.

Therefore, the same political event can be interpreted radically differently depending on the digital environment in which it circulates; while one community presents it as defending social reforms and historically excluded sectors, another can interpret it as a threat to institutions, economic stability, or democracy. Thus, the Colombian digital ecosystem is not structured solely around the circulation of information,

but also through political communities that select, reproduce, and validate those contents that confirm their own identities and ideological positions.

In this context, public debate tends to be structured around apparently irresolvable moral antagonisms, and if the circulation of information is biased by polarization and echo chambers, the space for rational agreement and collective deliberation is significantly reduced. Furthermore, it is observed that this diagnosis does not imply a condemnation of populism as a form of political expression, but it does point to the need to address its effects on the information ecosystem in the Colombian context in which we currently live.

Conclusions

The analysis developed in this article allows for several relevant conclusions to be drawn about digital populism in Colombia and its articulation with the phenomena of polarization and disinformation. First, it was analyzed how Gustavo Petro's communication on X systematically incorporates the defining elements of digital populism, including the construction of an identifiable adversary, the moralization of political conflict, and the appeal to the people as a legitimate source of sovereignty. These elements are combined with a communicative style characterized by high frequency of publication, confrontational tone, and strong emotional charge, which contribute to intensifying polarization among users.

Second, the architecture of platform X structurally favors the circulation of this type of message. The mechanisms of algorithmic recommendation, brevity, imposed by character limits, and the dynamics of engagement tend to reward content that generates intense emotional reactions, to the detriment of elaborated and nuanced arguments. In this sense, digital populism is not only a conscious strategy of political leaders but also a form of communication favored by the technical characteristics of the platforms.

Third, populism, polarization, and disinformation do not operate as independent phenomena, but rather interact and mutually reinforce each other, and this is reflected in the construction of strong political identities, characteristic of populist discourse, which creates the conditions for disinformation to circulate more easily, since users tend to prioritize group loyalty over fact-checking. At the same time, disinformation reinforces polarization by providing each political community with information that confirms its biases and perceptions of the adversary.

Fourth, the study reveals that the president's digital communication acquires particular relevance due to his status as head of state. Unlike other political actors, messages

disseminated from the president's personal account have greater symbolic and institutional reach, influence the public agenda, and can affect the way in which different sectors of citizenship interpret national and international political events. Therefore, the analysis of this type of discourse is especially relevant for understanding the effects of digital populism on democratic deliberation and the Colombian information ecosystem.

Finally, this study is limited to the qualitative analysis of several representative publications by Gustavo Petro on platform X and, therefore, does not intend to generalize the totality of his digital communication. Consequently, future research could expand the sample through quantitative or mixed analyses that allow examining a larger number of publications, as well as the interactions, dissemination, and reception of these contents by users. Important challenges are also posed for media education and the regulation of digital platforms. Strengthening citizens' critical capacities to evaluate the information they receive and designing institutional incentives that favor rational deliberation over emotional confrontation are urgent tasks for democratic consolidation in Colombia and Latin America.

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