

# Populism and authoritarianism during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador

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How did Bukele respond to the COVID-19 Crisis?

How did Bukele justify his response?

What can Bukele's response teach us about populism and the relationship between populism and authoritarianism?

## Background

- Nayib Bukele was elected as El Salvador's "centrist" populist president in 2019 (Weyland, 2021)
  - Bukele was elected as a result of elite discontent (Perelló & Navia, 2022) and to "solve" El Salvador's gang crisis (Osuna, 2020)
- Bukele is considered a populist and authoritarian leader (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021)
  - "Bukele responded to covid-19 in predictably authoritarian ways" (Smith, 2020, p. 86).
- Using Foucault's idea of biopolitics Hallock and Call (2021) argue that Bukele "juxtaposed his proactive, health-prioritizing discourse against the perceived failures of the traditional political elites" (p. 1590).



(Wiki Commons)

# COVID-19 in El Salvador

- March 14, 2020: All travelers entering El Salvador must quarantine for 30 days in *Centros de Cuarentena* (quarantine centres).
- March 21, 2020: National stay at home order begins (*Quédate en casa*), those who violate the stay at home order are taken to quarantine centres.
- April 17 - 20, 2020: Total closure of La Libertad municipality after videos of street gatherings are posted online.
- Human rights organizations criticized Bukele's actions (Amnesty International; Committee in Solidarity with the people of El Salvador; Human Rights Watch).

## Results of Bukele's COVID-19 Response

Country	Deaths per 100,000
New Zealand	36.97
<b>El Salvador</b>	<b>65.01</b>
Canada	113.58
Mexico	257.24
United States	314.89
Brazil	320.64

(Johns Hopkins, August 2022)

# The Present Study



## Methods

- This study examines how Bukele used Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic (his primary method of political communication).
- This study examines Bukele's Tweets from March 1 to April 30, 2020 ( $N = 659$ ).
- Uses qualitative content analysis (QCA) to find categories (themes) in Bukele's Tweets explaining and justifying his COVID-19 response (Boyatzis, 1998; Schreier, 2012).
- This study examines how Bukele's justification relates to his populist worldview.

## Results

- Themes identified on 25% of data-set and refined using whole data set (codebook developed)
- 5 themes (identified by two coders)
- Moderate agreement ( $\kappa = .587^{***}$ )



## Results

5 themes:

- Vilification of the opposition
- The virtue of the people
- Alarmism
- Consequences of actions
- International comparison
- + other category

# Results

## **Vilification of the Opposition**

- This theme features mentions of the opposition (parties, individuals, and businesses) in a negative light when these mentions relate to COVID-19 measures.

### **Opposition incompetence/corruption**

- “The emergency decree, as some deputies intend to approve, takes away tools that the Health Code and the other laws of our country already give us. The Presidency of the Republic will not allow deputies to put the population's health at risk” (March 29, 2020).

### **Opposition Lies**

- “They deceived you for 30 years and they intend to continue deceiving you now. Do not fall into the trap of those who deceived you so many times. This Government has shown them that it has done everything possible for their well-being. And it will continue to do so” (April 20, 2020).

### **Opposition Exacerbation**

- “As for Deputy Parker and his friends from the FMLN, today they only showed that they do not care if Salvadorans die as long as they achieve their political objectives. At some point in my life I thought they were better than their historical opponents. Today I realize that I was wrong” (March 15, 2020).

# Results

## **Virtue of the people**

- This theme includes mentions of the people of El Salvador as good, moral, and virtuous. Often Bukele's Tweets feature direct communication with specific groups.
- "Usulután, an entire department with almost no one detained for violating the quarantine. You will see the results in the health of your loved ones. Thanks" (March 23, 2020).
- "I am proud of my people. In 30 hours, we went from behaving like Salvadorans in 2019, to Salvadorans in 2020. We only come out of this putting, each one, a little bit of our part" (March 31, 2020).

# Results

## Alarmism

- This theme was applied when Bukele presented facts or speculations in an exaggerated way designed to cause panic or designed to force compliance with specific measures.
- “If we assign a mortality rate of 1% (the mortality rates that epidemiologists talk about are considerably higher), we would have: 4.62 billion  $\times$  1% = 46.2 million dead. A number equivalent to more than 7 Nazi holocausts together” (March 14, 2020).
- “In the third world it will be much worse than in the first. The reasons are obvious. We must stop discussing whether a measure is taken or not, whether we are alarmists or not, whether it is constitutional (at someone's discretion) or not, whether it is in the interests of a group or not. You have to act. Already” (April 1, 2020).

# Results

## Consequences of Actions

- This theme includes mentions of the need for or justifications of consequences for actions that Bukele believed harmed the collective health of the people of El Salvador.

### Legal Consequences

- “If you violate the quarantine, you will be detained by the authorities and the Ministry of Health will order your admission to a Quarantine Center, as it is a potential source of infection. There you will spend 30 days, or until the health authorities can verify that you do not carry the virus” (April 8, 2020).

### Death/Illness

- “In our country, we have almost 100 times more people wanting to catch the virus and transmit it to others than there are confirmed cases. And most of them are men (because they are the "smartest"). What part of many people will die because of their irresponsibility do they not understand?” (March 22, 2020).

# Results

## International Comparison

- Tweets were coded into this theme when Bukele compared El Salvador and other countries in order to justify his actions.
- “This is in Spain, now. Police must act before a person who violates the sanitary measures that the Government has imposed. Latin American countries do not understand that contagion is exponential. 15 days ago, Spain was better than most Latin American countries” (Includes video of police ordering people off the street) (March 15, 2020).
- “We see it in front and we don't see it. The difference between Italy and our countries is that the pandemic came earlier. The difference is a few days. And the health system, which is far superior to the Italian one. Let's react, everyone, before it's too late” (March 27, 2020).

# COVID-19 and Populism



# What Is Populism?

- Three competing understandings of populism: ideational, political strategic, and discourse approaches (Moffit, 2020).
- Comparativists most commonly rely on the ideational approach to understanding populism (Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde, 2004).
- “populism is best conceived in minimal terms as a unique set of ideas, one that understands politics as a Manichean struggle between a reified will of the people and a conspiring elite” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019, p. 3).
- Three features: 1) a Manichean and moral cosmology; 2) the people as a homogenous and virtuous community; 3) the depiction of the elite as a corrupt and self serving entity.

# Populism and Authoritarianism

- Competitive Authoritarianism: a hybrid civilian regime with formal democratic institutions but the incumbent uses the state to give themselves an advantage (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 5).
- Populists push fragile democracies towards competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Loxton, 2019):
  - Populists are generally political outsiders
  - Populists have a mandate to “bury” the establishment
  - Populists hostility confront accountability institutions
- Once in power populists erode checks and balances which leads to “a kind of competitive authoritarianism where ... alternative voices are increasingly silenced” (Hawkins & Littvay, 2019, p. 48).

# DISCUSSION

# **The Vilification of the Elite and Populism**

**Bukele's populist discourse related to COVID-19 prominently features  
“the people” and “the elite”**

## **Elite (established political parties) corruption/incompetence**

- “I see politicians trying to dismantle the ONLY protection we have against a health catastrophe. I see some saying that there is no need to worry, because there are few cases. PRECISELY BECAUSE OF THOSE MEASURES, THERE ARE STILL FEW CASES. EXACTLY FOR THAT! WHAT DO THEY WANT?” (March 23, 2020).

## **Elite against “the people”**

- “Deputies close today's plenary, they do not approve a single decree or renewal, they all withdraw and call to meet next Wednesday. Yes, next Wednesday. How can they despise the people so much?” (March 27, 2020).
- “The deputies of the @AsambleaSV will now decide if they are on the side of the health and life of the Salvadoran people or on the side of the virus and death. The state of exception is vital in order to contain the entry and subsequent spread of #COVID19” (March 13, 2020).

# The Vilification of the Elite and Populism

**Uses COVID-19 and alleged elite incompetence to justify circumventing traditional accountability institutions**

- "Does the @SalaCnaISV delegate to the unconstitutional prosecutor to protect the quarantine and try to take away all the powers to enforce it? The joke tells itself. NO resolution is above the constitutional right to life and health of the Salvadoran people." (March 15, 2020).
- "I don't understand the morbid desire they have for our people to die, but I swore I would uphold and enforce the constitution. Just as I would not abide by a resolution that orders me to kill Salvadorans, neither can I abide by a resolution that orders me to let them die" (March 15, 2020).

## Populism and Authoritarianism During COVID-19

- Discusses the elite's inability and unwillingness to adequately respond to the crises
- Bukele's populist discourse allowed him to justify a more authoritarian response to the global health crisis.
  - Highlighting how elite corruption leads to Bukele being the only voice of "the people".
  - Allows him to challenge institutions of accountability (Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Levitsky & Loxton, 2019).

# **Consequences of Actions and Populism**

**Bukele demonizes those who violate lockdown measures  
(portraying them as criminals or deviants)**

- **This strategy is used by populists to strengthen their conception of the people and justify**

“Not complying with the quarantine will take you to a Containment Center for 30 days to do it there, but you will also be criminally prosecuted and you can go to jail later. Although for anyone, taking care of their own life, that of their loved ones and that of others, should be enough” (March 22, 2020).



## Demonization and Populism

- Continues discourse of punitive populism first used against gangs (Osuna, 2020).
  - Supported because those who violate lockdown procedures can be presented as posing a *real* danger to the people.
  - Presented in relation to elites and those on *the bottom* (parasites, deviants, dangerous, etc.) (Brubaker, 2019).
  - Justifies strict measures against those who violate lockdown.



## Conclusion

- Challenges perceptions of how populists responded to COVID-19
  - The literature suggests that populists denied the severity of COVID-19 (Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2021; Hedges & Lasco, 2021; Smith, 2020).
  - Populists were unsuccessful at preventing illness.
- Demonstrates the dangers of unchallenged populism and how leaders can use crises to consolidate power.

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## **Bukele's populist discourse related to COVID-19 prominently features “the people” and “the elite”**

### **Elite (established political parties) corruption/incompetence**

- “I see politicians trying to dismantle the ONLY protection we have against a health catastrophe. I see some saying that there is no need to worry, because there are few cases. PRECISELY BECAUSE OF THOSE MEASURES, THERE ARE STILL FEW CASES. EXACTLY FOR THAT! WHAT DO THEY WANT?” (March 23, 2020).
- *“Veo políticos tratando de dismantelar la ÚNICA protección que tenemos contra una catástrofe sanitaria. Veo a unos diciendo que no hay que preocuparse, porque hay pocos casos. PRECISAMENTE POR TOMAR ESAS MEDIDAS ES QUE AÚN HAY POCOS CASOS. ¡EXACTAMENTE POR ESO! ¿QUÉ QUIEREN?”* (March 23, 2020).

### **Elite against “the people”**

- “Deputies close today's plenary, they do not approve a single decree or renewal, they all withdraw and call to meet next Wednesday. Yes, next Wednesday. How can they despise the people so much?” (March 27, 2020).
- *“Diputados cierran plenaria de hoy, no aprueban un solo decreto o renovación, se retiran todos y convocan para reunirse el próximo miércoles. Sí, el próximo miércoles. ¿Cómo pueden despreciar tanto al pueblo?”* (March 27, 2020).
- “The deputies of the @AsambleaSV will now decide if they are on the side of the health and life of the Salvadoran people or on the side of the virus and death. The state of exception is vital in order to contain the entry and subsequent spread of #COVID19” (March 13, 2020).
- *“Los diputados de la @AsambleaSV decidirán ahora si están del lado de la salud y la vida del pueblo salvadoreño o están del lado del virus y de la muerte. El estado de excepción es vital para poder contener el ingreso y la subsiguiente propagación del #COVID19”* (March 13, 2020)

## **Bukele demonizes those who violate lockdown measures (portraying them as criminals or deviants)**

- **This strategy is used by populists to strengthen their conception of the people.**

Not complying with the quarantine will take you to a Containment Center for 30 days to do it there, but you will also be criminally prosecuted and you can go to jail later. Although for anyone, taking care of their own life, that of their loved ones and that of others, should be enough” (March 22, 2020).

*“No cumplir la cuarentena te llevará a un Centro de Contención por 30 días a hacerla ahí, pero también serás procesado penalmente y podés ir a la cárcel después. Aunque para cualquiera, cuidar su propia vida, la de sus seres queridos y la de los demás, debería ser suficiente”* (March 22, 2020).

## **Uses COVID-19 and alleged elite incompetence to justify circumventing traditional accountability institutions**

“Does the @SalaCnaSV delegate to the unconstitutional prosecutor to protect the quarantine and try to take away all the powers to enforce it? The joke tells itself. NO resolution is above the constitutional right to life and health of the Salvadoran people.” (March 15, 2020).

*“¿La @SalaCnaSV delega al procurador inconstitucional para que tutele la cuarentena y trata de quitarnos todas las facultades para hacerla cumplir? El chiste se cuenta solo. NINGUNA resolución está por encima del derecho constitucional a la vida y salud del pueblo salvadoreño”* (March 15, 2020).

“I don't understand the morbid desire they have for our people to die, but I swore I would uphold and enforce the constitution. Just as I would not abide by a resolution that orders me to kill Salvadorans, neither can I abide by a resolution that orders me to let them die” (March 15, 2020).

*“No entiendo el deseo mórbido que tienen de que nuestra gente muera, pero juré que cumpliría y haría cumplir la constitución. Así como no acataría una resolución que me ordene matar salvadoreños, tampoco puedo acatar una resolución que me ordena dejarlos morir”* (March 15, 2020).