

Authoritarian Traits in Top Peruvian Presidential Candidates: Content Analysis of Their Social Media

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Abstract: *Authoritarianism continually threatens democracy, often using democratic mechanisms themselves—such as free elections—to eventually transform them into dictatorships, their antithesis. This study sought to identify authoritarian behavioral traits in the three leading candidates for the Peruvian presidency in the 2026 elections, based on their own statements posted on social media. The study follows the inductive method, is basic in nature, and is grounded in the positivist paradigm with a quantitative approach. It employed the content analysis technique using a coding sheet as its instrument, adopting the set of authoritarian behavior indicators proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), which include four dimensions and fifteen indicators. The sample consisted of 387 messages published by the three candidates on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X between May and October 2024. The results show that one of the candidates accounted for 86% of the 51 messages identified as containing authoritarian traits, openly presenting himself as a potential authoritarian, whereas the other two candidates still displayed minor warning signs. It is concluded that the Peruvian electoral offer regarding presidential candidates is not free from proposals that should raise concern for the country's democracy, as has already occurred in its late and recent history, and that the political system does not appear to foresee or prevent such risks. Based on these findings, this study calls for greater debate on the issue and draws attention to the need for the State, academia, and the media to engage more actively in advocating for the safeguards that democracy requires—today and always.*

Keywords: Authoritarianism, democracy, Authoritarian traits, politicians, social networking

1. Introduction

Like democracy, authoritarianism—its conceptual opposite—constitutes a term of undeniable concern in civic, political, and academic arenas. Like the construct of democracy, authoritarianism encompasses a complex concept that, on the basis of elementary initial guidelines, has progressively incorporated additional elements, updating itself over time. Thus, following Loxton (2024) [1], we note that authoritarianism in our era has become something of a buzzword that raises questions about what exactly it is, what it encompasses, and what it includes, as well as about the conceptual evolution it has undergone to reach its present meaning.

Although Peru has declared itself republican and democratic since its beginnings, in practice its independent political life has known more dictators than democrats. The history of Peru has been marked by a series of dictatorships that have deeply influenced the country's political and social development, leaving a balance that in political, social, and economic terms hardly yields a positive consensus. Since its independence from Spain, the nation has gone through several periods of authoritarian governments, often under military figures [2], who assumed power in moments of political crisis or social instability. At other times, authoritarian leaders have used a democratic façade while ultimately exercising authoritarian practices.

This research deals, in general terms, with authoritarianism; and in doing so, it also addresses democracy. More specifically, it examines the figure of the authoritarian leader, and more precisely the behavioral traits—or communicative signals—that reveal and warn of an inexorable outcome. It focuses on the Peruvian case in the context of the general elections scheduled for 2026.

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1.1. Authoritarianism and related concepts

The concept of authoritarianism seeks to classify a political system in which power is concentrated in a person, group, or ruling elite that exercises control over society without institutional constraints [3]. In addition, authoritarianism involves the suppression of dissent and the limitation of civil liberties within society [4]. In this way, authoritarianism stands in opposition to broad and equitable societal participation in the acts of government.

While Runciman (2018) [5] and Loxton (2024) [1] suggest that the emblematic characteristics of authoritarianism lie in the personalization of power, the suppression of opposition, overwhelming propaganda, and the manipulation of information, Levitsky and Way (2015) [6] note that authoritarian regimes often associate their actions with corruption, repression of minorities, and restrictions on individual freedoms. In fact, the former does not contradict the latter; rather, these associated practices facilitate the course of authoritarianism in its practical implementation.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) [7] warn that in the past authoritarian regimes were typically established through coups d'état, most of them military in nature, but that democratic mechanisms themselves have progressively been used to erect authoritarianism, either indirectly or through direct elections. The cases of Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany during the last century exemplify the former; the experiences of Fujimori in Peru or Chávez in Venezuela at the turn of the twenty-first century exemplify the latter. Authoritarianism can therefore adopt different forms and may appear as electoral, competitive, or closed authoritarianism, among others [6]. Thus, there is not a single version of authoritarianism today: the phenomenon has evolved, yet it persists.

Authoritarian regimes as they are recognized today do not correspond exclusively to any single defined political-philosophical current, as several scholars have warned. In this sense, three cases from modern and recent history illustrate authoritarian experiences: the anti-liberal one-party Marxism of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin in Russia from 1922 to 1924 [8]; the militarism of Francisco Franco in Spain from 1936 to 1975 [9]; and the hyper-liberal far-right politics of Donald Trump in the United States from 2017 to 2022 [7]. The lesson is that authoritarianism does not represent a political ideology in itself; rather, it outlines a mechanism for seizing and maintaining political power in ways contrary to democratic principles.

Concepts associated with authoritarianism include dictatorship, a regime in which power is concentrated in a single person or group, eliminating democratic oversight and suppressing civil rights [10], 1994); totalitarianism, a regime that seeks not only absolute control of political power but also domination over all aspects of social, cultural, and economic life [11]; and populism, a current characterized by the claim of a direct relationship between the leader and the masses, often bypassing democratic institutions in the name of "the people" [12]. On the other side, opposite authoritarianism, lies democracy: a political system in which power resides in the citizenry, which exercises its sovereignty through free and fair elections with the guarantee of fundamental rights and freedoms [13].

1.2. On Authoritarian Traits

An authoritarian individual may or may not be predictable. There are examples: because of their violent backgrounds and/or their nationalist and populist rhetoric, as well as their rebellious stances against previous regimes, it was somewhat foreseeable what Benito Mussolini in Fascist Italy, Juan Domingo Perón in Peronist Argentina, and Hugo Chávez in Chavista Venezuela would eventually do. Yet it was almost impossible to anticipate that Viktor Orbán would move, as prime minister,

from a democratic experience to a clearly autocratic one in contemporary Hungary. Something similar occurred with Alberto Fujimori: he began as a democratic president in Peru for a short period, then overturned the board and became the central figure of one of the most notorious dictatorships in the region in recent times [7]. The corollary is that an authoritarian does not always reveal himself... although political scientists are now more alert to traces that may anticipate such behavior.

Applebaum (2021) has noted how concern over the authoritarian personality has long been in the sights of philosophers and political scientists [8]. Some researchers, along these lines, have developed proposals on how to identify an authoritarian leader with the hope of anticipating the possibility that such a figure might eventually take power. As far as is known, Linz (1991) was the first political scientist who, in 1978, proposed a test aimed at identifying politicians opposed to democracy [9]. Much later, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), building upon Linz's original proposal, developed a set of what they called four behavioral warning signs designed to unmask an imminent authoritarian [7].

The proposal of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) is presented in a table of four key indicators of authoritarian behavior. It is an analytical matrix used to examine the history of a suspect figure on the basis of 15 questions that point to one of four dimensions: 1) rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game, 2) denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, 3) tolerance or encouragement of violence, and 4) readiness to restrict civil liberties of the opposition, including the media [7].

Rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game refers to the refusal to accept and follow the norms, institutions, and procedures established within democracy. It may include denying the legitimacy of elections, rejecting the separation of powers, or opposing the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This dimension constitutes a sign of “democratic erosion” or “democratic dismantling”, which occurs when political leaders or groups in power question or violate democratic norms and procedures in order to remain in power or impose their will [7]. The report *The Global State of Democracy 2022* warns that the rejection of democratic rules represents a major threat to democracy today [14].

The denial of the legitimacy of political opponents refers to the strategy through which a political leader or group questions the right or capacity of their opponents to participate in the democratic process and govern. It takes shape through accusations of electoral fraud, corruption, treason, or immorality used to discredit and marginalize political adversaries. This is one of the tactics employed by authoritarian leaders to erode democracy and illegitimately consolidate power [7]. For Linz (1991), denying the legitimacy of political opponents may lead to polarization and political violence [9].

Tolerance or encouragement of violence refers to the attitude or behavior of leaders or political groups who accept, justify, promote, or incite violence as a means to achieve political objectives, seize power, or silence opponents. Tilly (2003) defines “political violence” as actions that harm people or property in order to influence politics [15]. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) [7], this is another tactic used by authoritarian leaders to undermine democracy and climb to power. IDEA (2023) adds that tolerating or encouraging violence may lead to political polarization, repression of citizens, and the erosion of democratic institutions [14].

Finally, the authoritarian trait of a predisposition to restrict civil liberties of the opposition, including the media, reflects the tendency of leaders or political groups to limit or suppress the fundamental rights and freedoms of their opponents—such

as freedom of expression, association, assembly, and protest, among others [7]. Moyn (2018) conceptualizes the restriction of civil liberties as the limitation of fundamental human rights, potentially used to silence opponents and maintain power [16]. As a major threat to democracy today, it may lead to repression of dissent and restrictions on political participation (IDEA, 2023) [14].

1.3 Research on Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism has been a constant subject of study in political science, approached from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. The modern conceptualization of authoritarianism dates back to the pioneering work of Adorno et al. (1950), who linked it to an “authoritarian personality” characterized by tendencies toward cognitive rigidity, ethnocentrism, and submission to authority figures [17]. Since then, studies such as those by Altemeyer (1981) have evolved to distinguish between social and political authoritarianism, addressing not only psychological characteristics but also the social and economic conditions that promote this type of leadership [18].

At the global level, authoritarianism has been studied in diverse contexts and has gained particular relevance in the analysis of political leaders who display autocratic behaviors, especially during times of crisis. Levitsky and Way (2015) [6] proposed that hybrid and competitive regimes in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe have given rise to new forms of authoritarianism: the democratic façade remains, but institutions are gradually undermined. This phenomenon has been observed in countries such as Venezuela and Turkey, where authoritarian leaders may emerge within formally democratic systems [19].

In Europe, studies on authoritarianism emerged in response to the growth of populist movements and far-right parties. Research such as that of Pappas (2019) highlights how figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey have adopted authoritarian tactics within democratic systems, consolidating power through manipulation of the legal system and control of the media [20]. These leaders have been identified as part of a new wave of “illiberal democracies” which, although they maintain elections, undermine fundamental principles such as judicial independence and civil liberties, as noted by Zielonka (2018) [21].

Creemers (2020) developed studies on authoritarianism in Asia as a prominent characteristic of several political regimes, particularly in China under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the control of the Communist Party over all aspects of political and social life [22]. In fact, this research highlights the use of advanced technology for mass surveillance and social control as a distinctive feature of contemporary Chinese authoritarianism. Curato (2017), in turn, studied authoritarian regimes in other Southeast Asian countries [23]. The East, in general, with its long autocratic and patriarchal history, has shown resistance to transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy.

Another research approach to authoritarianism can be observed in Africa. Studies there emphasize that colonial legacies shaped state structures and dependent economic specializations that condition institutional capacity and democratic maneuverability in the postcolonial period. This subordinate insertion into the global economy complicates the consolidation of democratization processes [24].

In Latin America, research on authoritarianism has focused on the influence of populist leaderships that, during times of political and economic uncertainty, seek to centralize power. Weyland (2001) explored how this populism creates fertile ground

for the emergence of authoritarian leadership under the promise of resolving socioeconomic crises through radical measures [25]. Other studies have further examined how discourses of “national salvation” and heterodox economic policies may serve to justify authoritarian practices in Latin America.

More specifically and recently within the region, Hunter and Power (2019) have explored authoritarian tendencies in Brazil [26], while Henry (2019) examined the so-called “soft authoritarianism” in Mexico [27]. However, despite the extensive body of research on authoritarianism in Latin America, the Peruvian case has received less attention in global academia. Studies on authoritarianism in Peru have focused mainly on the figure of Alberto Fujimori, whose government (1990–2000) is considered paradigmatic for its centralist and repressive approach under the façade of an electoral democracy [28].

In reality, dictatorship has been the most common form through which authoritarianism has manifested itself in Peru throughout its more than 200 years of republican life. From its independence in 1821 to the twenty-first century, Peru has experienced more authoritarian governments (military or otherwise) than democratic ones, with episodes such as the Ochenio of Manuel A. Odría (1948–1956) and the Velasco regime of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975), according to Toche (2008) [2]. From 1821 to 1980 alone, Peru recorded 12 military governments and 4 authoritarian civilian governments, totaling 100 years of anti-democratic regimes compared with 43 years of constitutional governments [29]. During the last 45 years, although democracy has prevailed, its fragile composition has continually left the door open to authoritarian possibilities, shortening, among other effects, legitimate but inefficient mandates and pushing them toward equally improvised successions.

Dictatorships have left a lasting mark on Peruvian politics, shaping cycles of authoritarianism, resistance, and struggles for democracy in the country, leaving, according to Tanaka and Vera (2010), a rather weak political party system [30]. The aftermath of a history of coups d'état, dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes is still felt in the country as a political-civic hangover from which, even today in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, it remains difficult to recover.

1.4 Social Media Context

In presidential campaigns, social media has gained increasing relevance in shaping political discourse and projecting candidates, allowing unprecedented access to the perceptions, statements, and leadership styles of political figures. Within digital platforms, disintermediation enables political leaders to communicate directly with their audiences, bypassing journalistic filters and favoring personalistic and emotional discourse that reinforces their centrality among followers on networks such as X/Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram [31].

Authoritarian candidates, in particular, use these platforms not only to communicate policies but also to consolidate their power and construct a narrative that reinforces their authority [32]. They also rely on other communication channels to shape their image and control public discourse. Traditional media are often used to co-opt journalists and manipulate media content [33]. It is observed that the convergence of social media and traditional media allows candidates to build a cohesive and omnichannel public narrative.

This style of politics, using both traditional and digital media, functions effectively in electoral contexts: authoritarian discourse adapts, and the electorate perceives the leader as strong and capable of restoring order in the face of potential crises [34]. However, the strategic use of social media to elevate authoritarian candidates in contexts such as the Peruvian one has not been sufficiently

investigated, leaving an important gap in understanding how these leaders construct their authoritarian image in the digital era.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the following question: what authoritarian behavioral traits are present in the three leading candidates for the Peruvian presidency for the 2016 elections according to their own statements on social media? The general research problem corresponds to the general objective: to determine authoritarian behavioral traits in the three leading candidates for the Peruvian presidency in the 2016 elections based on their own statements on social media.

The results derived from this study will provide the political, scientific, academic, and activist communities with a well-grounded and critical reading of the current situation regarding the potential presence of authoritarian political leaders, with relevance beyond the general elections scheduled for 2026. The resulting report will be of considerable value not only in stimulating academic, political, and media debate on the issue but also as a practical resource for civil and political organizations committed to democratic values to take the measures they deem necessary—or even urgent.

2. Method

The research follows the inductive method, since the derived conclusions can be rationally and systematically generalized after analyzing particular facts [35]. In terms of its purpose, it is basic research, as it allowed the generation of new knowledge about observable phenomena without considering direct practical application in the social environment in the short term [36]. It is framed within the positivist paradigm, in which “reality is objective, the subject–object relationship is one of independence, where the researcher approaches the object with neutrality and seeks the causes of social phenomena through the quantification and measurement of variables” [37].

The approach was quantitative, which according to Nizama and Nizama (2020) [38], is guiding and universal, with unique characteristics and indispensable for the study of any phenomenon, whether in nature or society; it focuses on quantifying, predicting, and controlling the phenomenon under study. The design was non-experimental and cross-sectional: on the one hand, the variables involved were not manipulated, and on the other, the study was conducted at a single point in time [39]. The level was descriptive, whose main objective was to collect and analyze data in order to provide a precise and comprehensive characterization of the situation studied [40].

There was one unit of analysis, namely the social media messages of the three leading candidates for the presidency of Peru. The population, although not quantified for this study, can be considered finite. A non-probabilistic sample was used, based on convenience (proximity to the researchers) and criterion (respecting selection guidelines) [41]. The inclusion criteria were: 1) having appeared on Facebook, Instagram, X, or TikTok; 2) publications between May and October 2024 inclusive; and 3) being complete and available. The exclusion criteria were: 1) not being original posts but reposts from external sources; and 2) being the author’s own repost from a previous period. The final sample consisted of 387 messages, which were analyzed between August 3 and December 12, 2024.

The technique used to collect data from the social media messages of the leading candidates was content analysis, which makes it possible to describe, in a systematic manner, the formal and semantic elements of messages in order to obtain reasonable inferences [42]. The instrument was a coding sheet, which directly incorporated the

four dimensions of the variable *authoritarian traits* and its 15 indicators taken from Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) [7].

To analyze the quantitatively obtained information, the six-step procedure proposed by Arispe et al. (2020) was followed: 1) selection of the data analysis program; 2) implementation of data quality control; 3) implementation of validity and reliability control (not necessary in this case); 4) application of exploratory and descriptive data analysis; 5) hypothesis testing (not applicable in our case due to the descriptive and basic nature of the study); and 6) presentation of results [43].

To operationalize this procedure, descriptive statistics were used [44], specifically frequency statistics and comparative percentages. The records obtained from the content analysis made it possible to transfer the data into tables and figures in Excel aimed at examining each variable. In this way, the analysis regarding the proposed dimensions and indicators was facilitated. Based on the observations derived, it was possible to describe and discuss the results in order to reach conclusions.

The basic ethical aspects required for sound scientific research practice, as proposed by Reyes et al. (2020) [45], were fulfilled: 1) originality, understood as the researchers' capacity to produce innovative ideas, methods, and results, as is clearly the case in this study; 2) transparency, meaning the researchers' commitment to being clear, honest, and open in all aspects of the study, which is fulfilled here since all materials are made available to be eventually examined; and 3) integrity, defined as the capacity of researchers to act honestly, fairly, and responsibly in all aspects of the work, which is declared in good faith, remaining subject—should the contrary be found—to public sanction.

3. Results and Discussion

Two warnings should be noted before presenting the results of the content analysis:

- The candidates' political campaign messages did not begin at the same time. By May 2024—the starting month of our analysis—Antauro Humala had already begun actively using his social media accounts to position his messages and political stance. Keiko Fujimori followed shortly after. Two months later, in July 2024, Hernando de Soto—a late and less productive actor in communicational terms—entered the arena of social media.

- Several of the candidates' political messages are essentially repeated across more than one social network: 100% in the cases of Fujimori and De Soto, and slightly fewer in Humala's case. This phenomenon can be understood within the framework of the concept of digital convergence: multiple channels acting in confluence, collaborating with one another, overlapping, reinforcing each other, and exerting a deeper impact on how users construct meaning about reality today [46], [47].

Overall, the content analysis showed that the three leading candidates for the 2026 Peruvian presidential elections were quite active in disseminating their political messages through social media. Between May and October 2024—when the political campaign was still gaining momentum—the three candidates together posted 387 messages across four of the most widely used social media platforms in Peru.

The use of social media for political messaging was led by Antauro Humala with 194 posts (50.13% of the total), followed by Keiko Fujimori with 115 (29.72%), while Hernando de Soto ranked last with 78 messages (20.16%). Regardless of the

specific approach taken in their messages, the candidates used social media to construct narratives that aligned with what they communicated through other channels [33] and in doing so, they sought social validation within a context where social networks have become the primary spaces from which citizens challenge, restrain, and even censor politicians[48].

Facebook hosted the majority of the candidates’ messages, accounting for 181 posts, of which 117 belonged to Humala. It was followed by Instagram with 91 posts, 57 of them from Humala. In third place was X (formerly Twitter) with 83 posts, although Humala posted only three messages there, making it by far the platform he used the least. TikTok, with 32 posts in total, was the least active platform, though Humala again led with 17 posts.

In fact, Facebook is the most widely used social network for news and political debate in more than 40 countries ([49]. By using Facebook, the three candidates aligned with the preferences of the Peruvian population, which identifies it as the main platform for obtaining information in general (72%) and news in particular (53%) [50].

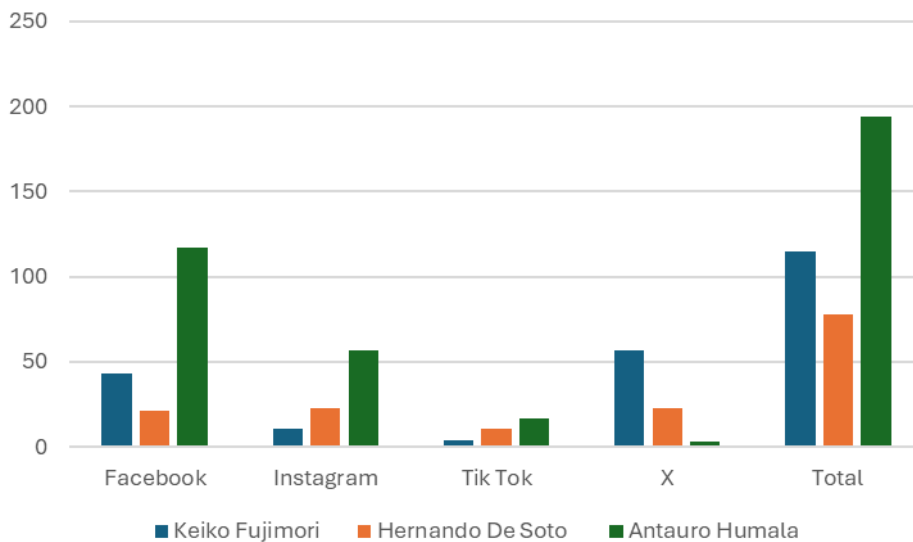


Figure 1. Number of messages per political candidate and their social network

Out of the 387 political messages posted by the three presidential candidates, 51 displayed authoritarian behavioral signals (13.18%). Although at first glance the overall rate appears relatively low—representing slightly more than one in ten messages—a more detailed candidate-by-candidate analysis revealed a concerning concentration.

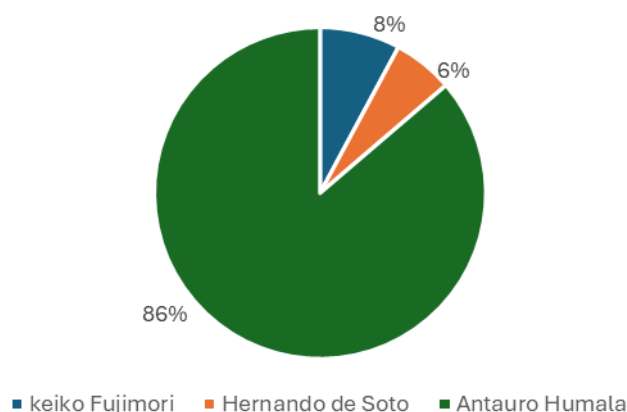


Figure 2. Percentages of authoritarian messages by political candidate.

Messages with authoritarian traits varied depending on the candidate, revealing an undeniable polarization. De Soto had three of his 78 messages with some sign of authoritarian behavior, representing 3.85% of his personal total, 0.78% of the overall total, and 6% of all messages with authoritarian traits found. Fujimori, with four messages exhibiting authoritarian traits, accounted for 3.48% of his personal total, 1.03% of the overall total, and 8% of all messages with authoritarian traits.

Candidate Humala stood out. He had 44 messages with warning signs of authoritarianism. This represented 22.68% of his personal total social media posts, 11.37% of total, and 86% of the 51 messages with authoritarian traits found.

Bosseta (2018) has studied the use of social media by vertical politicians to consolidate their power and create contexts that strengthen their authority [32]. Applebaum (2021), among others, has noted how most authoritarian presidential candidates in Eastern European countries have effectively combined the use of analog media with digital media—including social networks—to promote ultranationalist, demagogic, and dictatorial discourses [8].

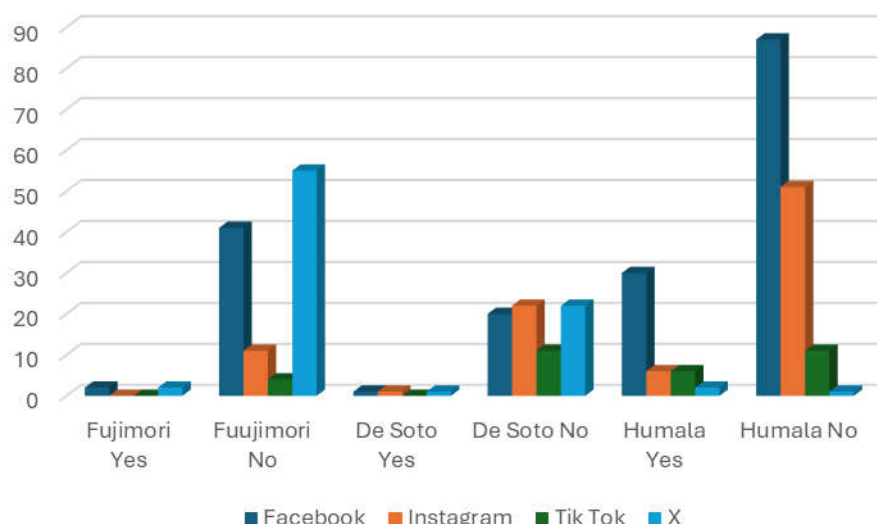


Figure 3. Comparison of messages according to the presence or absence of authoritarian traits by candidate and their social network

Facebook, the social network that hosted the average number of candidates' messages, also had the highest concentration of the ones with authoritarian traits: 33 messages, or 64.71% of the total. Conversely, X showed the fewest messages with authoritarian traits: five, or 9.80% of the total; however, each candidate had one or two messages on that social network that raised concerns about authoritarianism.

Chart 1. Comparison of messages according to the presence or absence of authoritarian traits by candidate and social network.

Candidate	Authoritarian Traits	Facebook		Instagram		Tik Tok		X		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Keiko Fujimori	Yes	2	1.74	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.74	4	1.03
Fujimori	No	41	35.65	11	9.57	4	3.48	55	47.83	111	28.68
Hernando de Soto	Yes	1	1.28	1	1.28	0	0.00	1	1.28	3	0.78
De Soto	No	20	25.64	22	28.21	11	14.10	22	28.21	75	19.38
Antauro Humala	Yes	30	15.46	6	3.09	6	3.09	2	1.03	44	11.37
Humala	No	87	44.85	51	26.29	11	5.67	1	0.52	150	38.76
Total		181	46.77	91	23.51	32	8.27	83	21.45	387	100

Source : Own Elaboration.

Messages with authoritarian features appeared almost proportionally in the months with the highest number of political messages overall: September and October 2024. October was the second most prolific month for political messages from all three candidates, with 74, second only to August with 88; September follows with 68 messages.

The increased interactivity of candidates on social media during August and October could be explained by certain events that directly involved them, such as the Attorney

General's request to the Supreme Court to declare Antauro Humala's party illegal [51] or the Constitutional Court's exclusion of Keiko Fujimori from the charge of obstruction of justice [52]. This occurred within a pre-electoral context [53] with the 2026 election schedule progressing. Of the political messages that appeared in September, 14 contained some indicator of authoritarianism, representing 20.59% of the messages for the month and 27.45% of all messages with authoritarian traits. October registered nine messages with authoritarian characteristics, representing 12.16% of the messages for the month and 27.45% of all messages with authoritarian traits. With eight cases in May, this is the third month with the most authoritarian messages, a month that certainly registered 68 messages from the candidates in total.

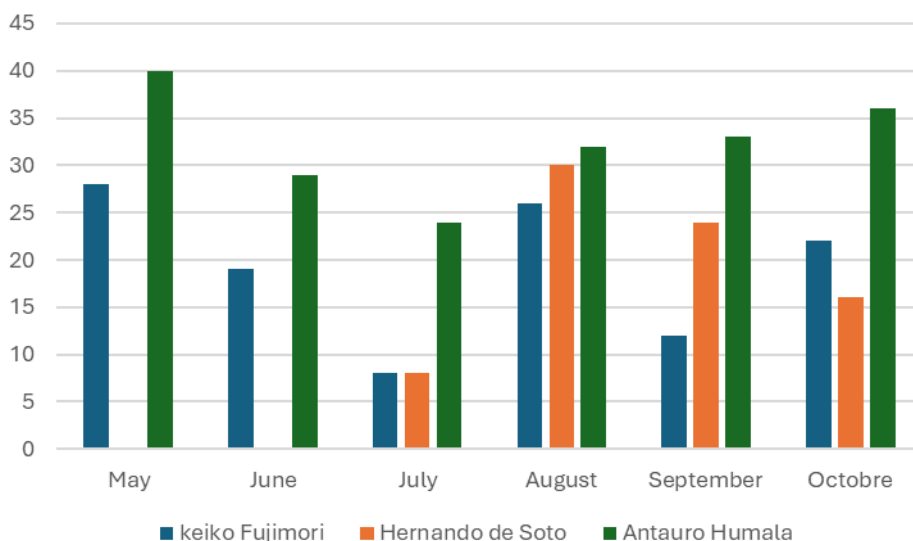


Figure 4. Number of political messages per candidate monthly.

The greatest number of authoritarian messages presented in September were observed when the social climate was bombarded by the debate on citizen insecurity, with an increase in the crime wave linked to illegal mining [54], in which extremist proposals emerged, such as that of candidate Humala, who reaffirmed his desire to kill former presidents [55] and consolidated his alliance with Juntos por el Perú with an extremist discourse [56]. Also noteworthy in the political climate was the political impact of the death of Alberto Fujimori, father of candidate Keiko Fujimori [57].

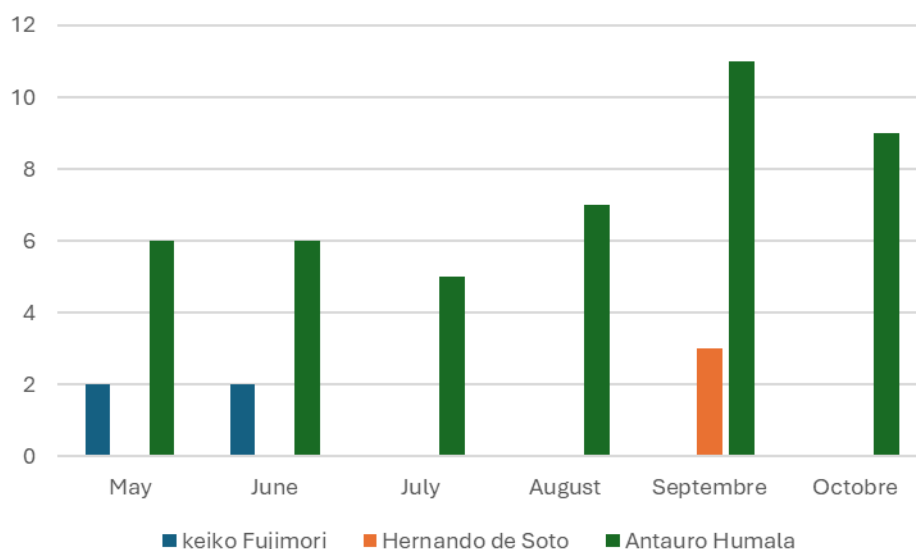


Figure 5. Number of authoritarian messages per political candidate monthly

Not all indicators of authoritarianism were fulfilled to the same degree, and consequently, neither were the dimensions that comprise the variable under study. In fact, most indicators were not observed after the analysis; authoritarian indicators were present in seven of the 15 proposed by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) [7]. These indicators are mutually exclusive depending on the candidate: five correspond to Humala, two to De Soto, and one to Fujimori.

In 23 messages from Humala, the analysis answered "yes" to indicator 14: "Has he threatened to take legal action or other punitive measures against critical individuals belonging to opposition parties, civil society, or the media?" In 15 messages, the analysis answered "yes" to indicator 3: "Does he intend to use (or approve of using) extra-constitutional measures to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass demonstrations aimed at forcing a change in government?" And in questions 13 through 11: Does he reject the Constitution or express his intention not to abide by it? In nine messages for the 11th: Has he tacitly supported the violence of his supporters by refusing to unequivocally condemn and penalize it? And in eight for the 12th: Has he praised (or refused to condemn) other prominent acts of political violence, both past and occurring elsewhere in the world? The answer is yes.

In a Facebook message dated May 3, 2024, during a meeting with the National Alliance of Transporters of Peru, with whom he was playing a game of soccer, Humala made clear his stance on using extra-legal mechanisms to shape a potential government of his, thus exhibiting authoritarian trait 1. In an Instagram message dated September 17, 2024, he announced extra-constitutional measures regarding transnational mining from the Southern Copper Corporation's Tía María project in the Tambo Valley, Arequipa, undermining the current Political Constitution of Peru and threatening those who oppose him, thereby fulfilling authoritarian traits 1, 3, and 14. On June 11, 2024, via X, Humala celebrated the ideological and political alliance with the Tawantinsuyo regional movement in Cusco; The pact, which includes the application of the death penalty, again fulfills indicator 14. Via TikTok, on May 8, 2024, an interview with Telesur was shared in which he discussed his relationship with the left and the government of Pedro Castillo, distancing himself from leader Vladimir Cerrón and President Dina Boluarte. He is also seen as permissive of the use of violence by those in power, falling under authoritarian indicator 11.

In a message on September 7, 2024, via Facebook, Hernando de Soto asserts that the current government—under President Boluarte—is Marxist-Leninist and, because of this, the crisis in the country is deepening without any action being taken against the advance of crime and illegal mining. She falls under authoritarian trait 5. She will deliver virtually the same message on the same date on Instagram and X.

On May 17, 2024, candidate Fujimori publishes a message on Facebook questioning the work of two prosecutors, accusing them of having indirectly favored Pedro Castillo, thus casting doubt on a clean electoral process. On June 28, 2024, in another message, she uses statements from a former advisor to the Public Prosecutor's Office to claim that she was the true winner of the 2021 general elections. In both cases, Fujimori questions the past electoral process, falling under authoritarian indicator 4. Both messages will be echoed on social network X. The indicator-candidate correspondence leads to another resulting correspondence: the dimension-candidate correspondence. Humala, moreover, as evidenced by the number of messages and indicators present, encompasses three of the four dimensions of Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) proposal [7]: 1. Rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game; 3. Tolerance or encouragement of violence; and 4. Predisposition to restrict the civil liberties of the opposition, including the media. De Soto is reflected in one dimension: 2. Denial of the legitimacy of political adversaries. And Fujimori in one as well: 1. Rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game. If we consider the proposal by Hernández and Mendoza (2023) [39] that for a variable to fulfill its content validity, most of the dimensions and indicators that define the variable must be present, the concern regarding an authoritarian prospect does not apply to candidates De Soto or Fujimori, but it is outlined in Humala's case.

Chart 2. Number of incidents of authoritarian traits in social media messages per candidate

Candidate	Number of incidents	Authoritarian Traits	Scope
	13	Does it reject the Constitution or express his or her will not to abide by it?	
Antauro Humala	15	3. Does he or she intend to use (or approve of the use of) extra-constitutional measures to change the Government, such as military coups, violent insurrections or mass demonstrations aimed at forcing a change in Government?	1. Rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game.
	9	11. Has she or he tacitly supported the violence of your supporters by refusing to condemn and penalize it unambiguously?	3. Tolerance or promotion of violence

	8	12. Has she or he praised (or rejected to condemn) other prominent acts of political violence, both past and occurring in other parts of the world?	
	23	14. Have you threatened to take legal action or other punitive measures against critical individuals belonging to opposition parties, civil society, or the media?	4. Willingness to restrict the civil liberties of the opposition, including the media.
Hernando de Soto	3	6. Does she or he claim that his or her rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?	2. Denial of the legitimacy of political adversaries
Keiko Fujimori	4	4. Is she or he trying to undermine the legitimacy of the elections, for example by refusing to accept credible election results?	1. Rejection (or weak acceptance) of the democratic rules of the game.

Source: Own Elaboration.

In 28 political messages, with two out of four indicators fulfilled, Humala only partially meets the first dimension. Rejecting or accepting the democratic rules of the political game, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) [7], signals democratic erosion or dismantling: democracy in practice becomes fragmented and eventually collapses, becoming—as IDEA, 2023 [14] points out—the main threat to current democracies. In September 2022, Chile's President Gabriel Boric, from the extreme socialist wing, even proposed, through the democratic channel of a popular referendum, a change to his country's Constitution, to which the electorate responded with a resounding "no" with 62% of the vote; one of the points that most strongly justified the rejection was the proposal for presidential reelection [58]. In Peru, on December 7, 2022, the constitutional president, Pedro Castillo, announced in a national address his determination to overturn the democratic order with measures that included prohibiting certain key democratic institutions and restricting fundamental civil rights, an attempt that was quickly condemned by combined political forces as a coup d'état [59].

In 17 messages, also meeting two out of four indicators, Humala only partially fulfilled the dimension of promoting or tolerating violence. Framed within the political sphere, this refers to violence whose actions harm people and property in order to influence the political course of events, for example, when people are repressed or tortured to silence protests [15]. Many dictatorial leaders use it to cling to power [7], bringing at least three consequences: 1) political polarization, 2) repression of citizens, and 3) erosion of the institutions that safeguard democracy (IDEA, 2023) [14]. This would be—as Moya (2021:

126) points out—a collective form of violence, inflicted by a political or ideological group, or even the State; and which, by attempting to impose itself against any rational criteria, approaches terrorist violence: “And all this in the name of a cause, which is actually a means to achieve something of greater significance” [60].

In 23 messages, with three fulfilled indicators, Humala reveals his predisposition to restrict the civil liberties of the opposition, including the media. This is a sign of a desire to limit fundamental human rights and thus cling to power by keeping potential opponents at bay [16]. And Wolf (2024) has made it clear that authoritarian regimes impose limitations on citizens' civil liberties [4]. For Applebaum (2021), when civil liberties are restricted in general, these non-mutually exclusive possibilities can arise: 1) some citizens will simply remain silent, 2) some will align themselves with the authoritarian policy and eventually try to integrate themselves into it (with or without success), 3) others will offer active resistance and struggle from ideological or practical fronts, or a hybrid of both [8].

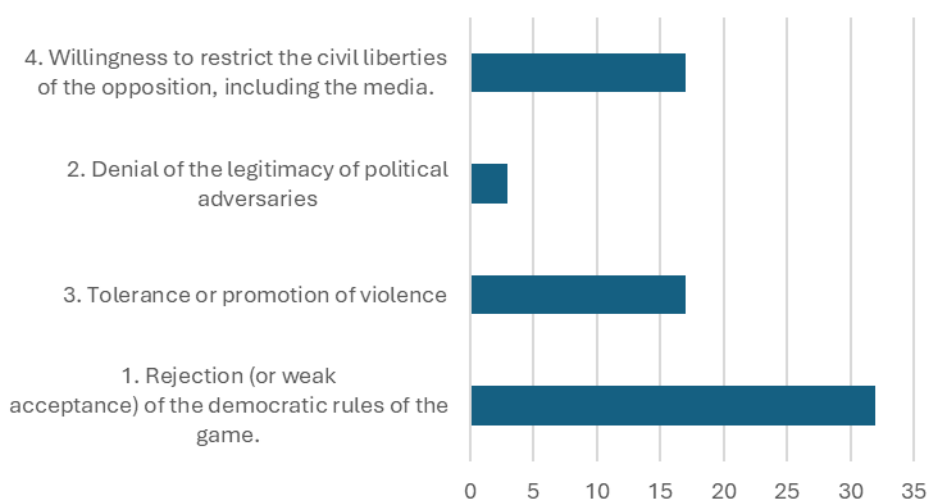


Figure 6. Number of incidents of messages with authoritarian traits by dimension

4. Conclusions

The Peruvian electoral offer in terms of presidential candidates is not free of political profiles that, through their proposals or positions communicated in messages on social media, are outlined—more or less—as authoritarian personalities. The content analysis that supports this study provides evidence that one of the three candidates for the presidential seat, who were leading the polls as of June 2024, expressed himself quite openly in favor of measures of an authoritarian nature, while the other two, although much further from that position, still made statements that did not pass the democratic filter. What has been a trend in every general electoral process in Peru over at least the last 30 years—in which a similar profile emerges that later reveals its dictatorial conduct, whether it wins the elections or not—remains concerning, even more so now that the South American country has become entangled over the past seven years in shortened presidential terms and unexpected successions on the one hand, and has several former presidents serving effective or suspended prison sentences on the other. The country has not learned from this constant in its recent and not-so-recent history, and democratic institutions have not managed—if they have even attempted—to articulate containment plans in the face of figures with authoritarian impulses. If

these warnings are not addressed as soon as possible, the country's political future runs a high risk of falling at any moment into dictatorship, as its own past and the examples of other nations have already demonstrated.

In the analysis of what we can provisionally call the Peruvian case, the figure of the authoritarian political leader emerges from fulfilling few, some, or many indicators of the dimensions that shape authoritarian traits. It was thus relatively easy to separate, from the trio of top candidates—as of June 2024—the one who was virtually profiled as authoritarian: candidate Humala. His own words would betray him once spoken and amplified by the viral power of social media, which appear neutral but act as powerful conduits for everything that can be said in this Digital Era. At the opposite extreme, this study did not find a presidential candidate in a state of pure democracy; however, the almost general absence of authoritarian signals encourages viewing them as possibly democratic figures. These findings leave double lessons directed according to the recipient: for politicians, to pay closer attention to their speeches, their responses, and their verbosity—the democracy is watching them; and for citizens, to read in the statements of their politicians both the obvious and the subtle, the direct and the convoluted—the verbal signals of a potential authoritarian prospect will sooner or later erupt.

The main strength of this research lies in having recognized a gap within a widely studied macro topic such as authoritarianism, and its derivative, authoritarian traits, specifying it through an initiative that connects it with the space in which it could be recognized as a variable—social media—applied to a given reality, the Peruvian one, with a suggestive historical background and an ongoing presidential electoral process as the setting. For this purpose, using a modern methodological platform that also draws on the historicity of studies on authoritarian traits, such as the proposal by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), supports this endeavor. Nevertheless, limitations are also acknowledged, such as having reduced the research to a solely quantitative approach and relying on a single technique—content analysis—thus leaving aside additional methodological possibilities and data collection techniques that would undoubtedly enrich the approach to the phenomenon under study. We trust that other researchers will take up the baton of this line of research and fill these gaps.

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